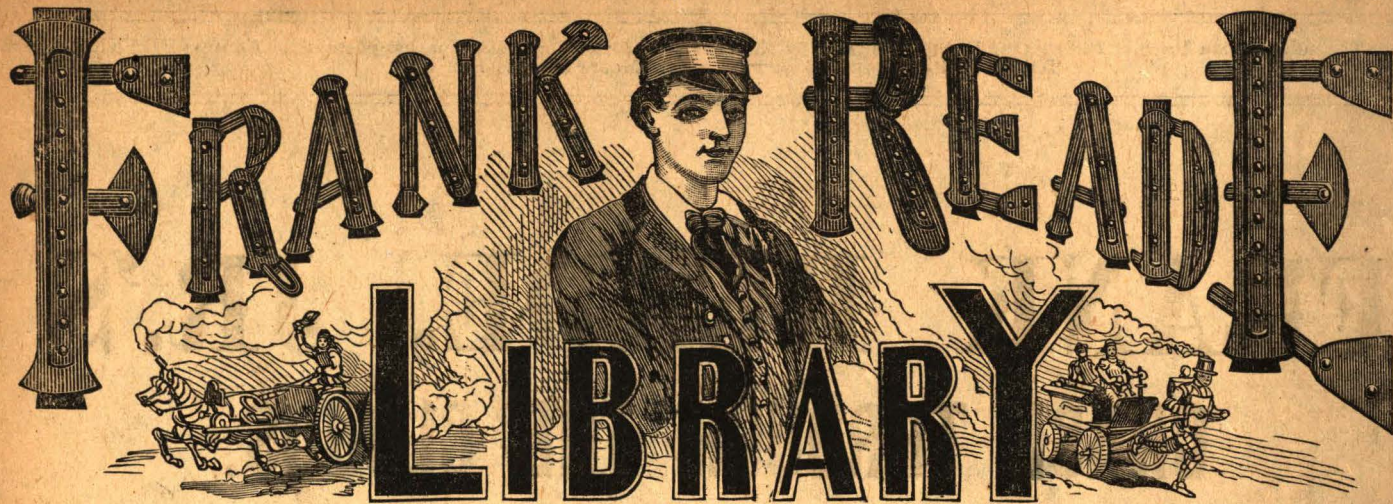


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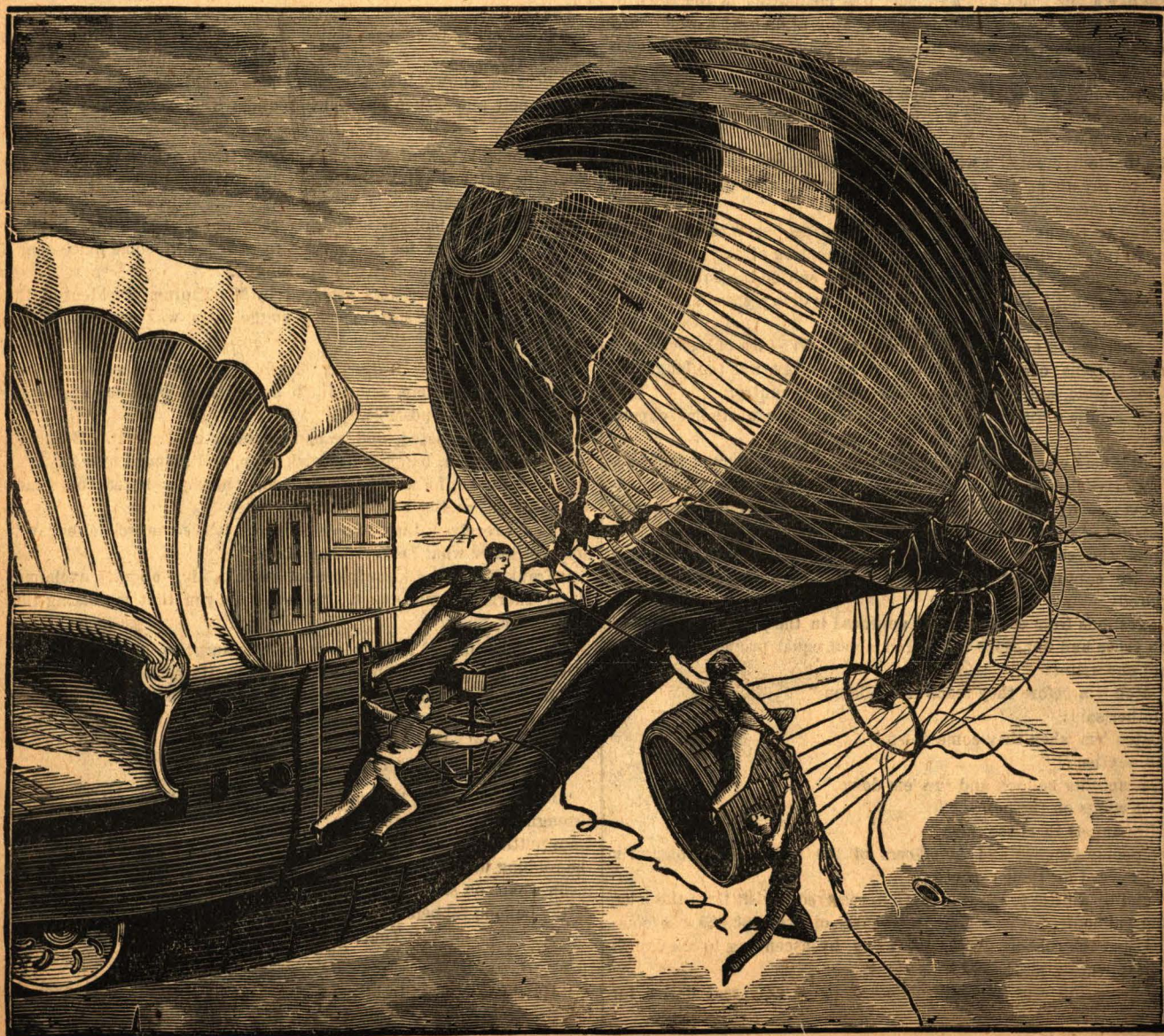


Entered as Second Class Matter at the New York, N. Y., Post Office, October 5, 1892.

No. 41. { COMPLETE. } FRANK TOUSEY, PUBLISHER, 34 & 36 NORTH MOORE STREET, NEW YORK. { PRICE } Vol. II
New York, July 1, 1893. ISSUED WEEKLY. { 5 CENTS. }

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FRANK READE, JR.'S CHASE THROUGH THE CLOUDS. By "NONAME."



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FRANK READE, JR.'S CHASE THROUGH THE CLOUDS.

By "NONAME,"

Author of all the Frank Reade Stories

CHAPTER I.

THE THIEVING BALLOONISTS—FRANK READE, JR.

ONE day a few years ago a robbery was committed in the town of Cranston, in the State of Illinois, by a couple of men who, when hard pressed by pursuers, sought refuge in a balloon, which carried them up above the clouds.

The pursuers wondered how such things could be, and began to ask themselves whether life was worth living if riches could thus take balloons and fly away.

The incident created a widespread sensation, and the papers had much to say about the new dodge the criminals had gotten up to avoid the officers of the law.

By and by the humorous members of the press began to print jokes about it, till everybody smiled at the bare mention of it.

The sheriff was asked why he didn't throw salt on the balloon's tail, and thus catch it. Others also asked why he didn't spread his wings and fly away in pursuit of the thieves.

The poor sheriff never heard the last of it. The idea of a sheriff and posse of citizens chasing a balloon on horseback was too laughable even for a stoic, and the grin ran all round the country.

After awhile a little town over in Indiana had a similar experience.

Two robbers cleaned out a bank and fled. A hot pursuit followed. The fugitives fled to the woods, where, in an open space, a huge balloon was already inflated and ready for ascent. They cut the rope and flew up out of reach of the exasperated pursuers.

Again the country was thrown into a merry fit of laughter, but a desire to capture the bold and inventive rascals took possession of everybody.

Suggestions from every quarter appeared in the papers, in some of which sense and nonsense blended in about equal proportions.

Said one writer:

"Catch 'em before they reach the balloon."

Another said:

"Catch 'em when they come down."

Still another:

"Get another balloon and run 'em down."

"Put wings on the police."

"Hire angels to chase them."

The people laughed and the officers of the robbed bank offered a liberal reward for their capture.

By and by a little town over in Ohio received a visit from the marauding balloonists. This time a robbery of over \$30,000 was committed, and the robbers again got away by ascending to the clouds and disappearing altogether from sight.

The sensation was renewed, followed by a universal desire for vengeance.

The people had laughed enough over that kind of business, and now set about to devise some means by which the robbers could be captured and brought to justice.

The Ohio victims offered a liberal reward, and many inventive brains lost sleep trying to suggest a plan by which the daring villains could be caught.

It became known that the balloonists would descend at night in some lonely place, then proceed to plunder wherever plunder could be found.

One would think, after such publicity, that a balloon in the air would be watched till it descended, and the occupants captured and held for identification.

But at night a balloon cannot be seen any distance, and hence it was an easy matter for the balloon to descend in some place near a country town without any one knowing it.

Among the many letters received by Mr. Thorne, president of the robbed bank in Cranston, offering suggestions, was one written in a boyish hand.

The banker looked it over carelessly at first and then read it the second and third time, after which he laid it aside, intending to answer it as soon as possible.

But two days passed, and he had forgotten all about it. His son, a youth of nineteen, happened to pick it up, and glanced over it.

"Holy smoke, father," he exclaimed, "here's a letter from Frank Reade's son," and he showed him the letter.

"Yes, I received that two days ago. It's some school-boy who does not know what he is talking about."

"Frank Reade not knowing what he is talking about!" exclaimed Harry Thorne in amazement. "I guess it's you that is talking that way, father."

The banker looked at his son in no little surprise, and asked:

"What do you know about Frank Reade, Harry?"

"Why, I know that his father is the greatest inventor of the age. He is the man who went around the world in a flying machine."

"The deuce! Is he the man?"

"Yes, sir. See what his son says:

"DEAR SIR,—The balloon robbers can only be caught by pursuit through the air. A flying ship, or machine can run them down, and I am putting the finishing touches to one that will, I think, break up the robbing business at one blow. What I wish to know is, do you mean what you say when you offer a reward of \$2,000 for the capture of the balloon robbers? An immediate answer will very much oblige

"Yours truly,

FRANK READE, JR.,

"Readestown."

"Have you written to him, father?" Harry Thorne asked when he had finished reading the letter.

"No. I didn't think it worth while to do so. The idea of a flying ship is too absurd for a moment's thought."

"But his father flew around the world in one."

"Yes. I remember reading about such a thing a few years ago."

"Well, do you suppose his father will not see that he makes no mistake?"

"I never thought of that," said the banker. "I will write to him at once and answer his question."

The letter was written, and a few days later another came from young Reade acknowledging the receipt of it, and suggesting that when the balloon appeared in any part of the country again that the fact be telegraphed to him without delay, stating also in which direction the wind was blowing at the time, adding:

"I am ready to start at any moment; but you must keep the fact concealed from the public, as it would put the robbers on their guard were it known to them."

Young Harry Thorne was on tip toe to see and know all about the flying machine or ship, and as soon as he heard the letter he said to his father:

"I want to go and see that thing, father."

"I'd like to see it myself," said the banker, "but I can't leave home just now."

"Well, let me go and see it," Harry asked.

"Certainly you may go if you first get permission from young Reade to see the thing."

Harry sat down and wrote a letter to Frank Reade, Jr., telling him how anxious he was to see the machine, and that he would come to Readestown if assured that he would be allowed to see it.

Two days later he received a cordial invitation from young Reade to visit him at his home in Readestown, where under the pledge of secrecy he could see the flying ship which was now ready for instant use.

Harry boarded the next western bound train and went speeding on his way to Readestown.

When he arrived at the thriving little town it was dark.

He alighted from the train and looked around for some one of whom he could inquire the way to the Reade residence.

A boyish-looking youth about his own age stepped up to him and asked:

"Are you Harry Thorne?"

"Yes—are you Frank Reade?"

"Yes."

The shook hands heartily, and then Frank led the way to a carriage which was in waiting.

"All right, Pomp," he said to the driver, when they seated themselves inside.

"Whar's de baggage, sah?" Pomp asked of young Thorne.

"Here's the check for a valise," said Harry, handing it to him.

The valise was found, and placed inside with the two youths, after which they were driven away to the residence of the great inventor, Frank Reade, Sr., whose inventions had made his name famous throughout the scientific world.

A late supper followed, and then the two youths, who seemed to take a fancy to each other, went up-stairs to Frank's room.

There they talked till midnight over the affair which had brought them together.

"My father does not take any stock in the machine," said Harry, "but I do. I read about the inventions of your father, and his trips through the air, and knew at once that you could do what you said you could."

"Of course I can. I would not boast of being able to do a thing unless I knew that I could do it."

"That's what I thought, and so I asked father to let me come on here and see it."

"Here are all the drawings," said Frank, opening a drawer in the table in the center of the room and displaying a large number of drawings on snow white card paper.

Harry became so deeply interested that Frank took them all out and laid them on the table.

The first thing he showed was a drawing of the completed air-ship—or rather flying-ship, as he termed it, and young Thorne gazed upon it like a child on some scene of enchantment.

In the drawing the ship was pictured in full sail, and no bird ever seemed more at home in the air.

"De you know that she can fly?" he asked of Frank.

"Yes."

"That's enough. Let's go to bed and to-morrow we can take a look at it."

CHAPTER II.

THEY START FOR THE THIEVES.

WHEN morning came young Thorne was so eager to see the flying-ship that he could scarcely wait for breakfast. The delay in the meal seemed like torture to him, and he could not help wondering why the family remained so long at table. He did not know that it was his own eager desire to get outside and see the machine that made the minutes seem like hours to him.

But there is an end of all things, and the time came when Frank said to him:

"Come on now, and we'll see the machine."

He did not need a second invitation, but went along with Frank.

Out in the rear yard they made their way toward a large gate.

It was locked.

Frank took a key from his pocket and unlocked it, revealing a very high board inclosure of about one acre in extent.

As they passed inside Frank carefully closed and locked the gate, saying as he did so:

"Even my neighbors here know nothing about this, so I keep out everybody except my father and his two men."

"What two men?" Harry asked, looking around the yard.

"Barney and Pomp."

"Oh, yes, I've read of them. They are here yet, are they?"

"Yes, and will stay with us as long as we live, I guess."

"You can trust them with any secret, I suppose?"

"Yes. I've trusted them often, and know that they never go back on me. There is the ship. You can see her now just as she stands ready to go up at a moment's notice. I have everything or board that would be needed for a long trip through the air."

"How is she run? What is her motive power?"

"Electricity, of course. Any other motive would be too heavy. You see that the hull is precisely like that of a ship, is twenty feet in length, has a pilot house, as you see there, and a bow and prow like that of a sailing ship. Back of the pilot house is the cabin with berths for four. On either side is a passage for those in charge. Under the cabin is the machinery that gives the motive power that runs the ship. It has a double set of wings—one set for lifting the ship in the air and the other to propel it in any direction. I don't know what progress she can make in the face of a strong wind. I am inclined to think that I will find plenty of room for improvement, and I am going to be on the lookout for such all the time."

"Can I go on board of her?" Harry asked.

"Of course—come on," and Frank led the way on board the strange yacht-looking craft.

Harry saw that everything was constructed of the lightest material consistent with strength.

"Is there not danger of such a light craft giving away under a strain of some kind?" Harry asked.

"She is netted through and through with strong steel wire," replied Frank. "I have provided against danger in that direction."

In the cabin Harry saw four very comfortable berths; also guns and revolvers hanging in proper places handy for instant use.

"We even have provisions and water on board ready to go in ten minutes after receiving news of the reappearance of the robber balloonists."

"How do you propose to capture them when you overtake them?" Harry asked.

"If they don't surrender and come on board we'll fire into their balloon, and that will send them to earth pretty quick. They will be very glad to surrender when they find that we mean business."

After spending nearly an hour in examining the flying ship, Harry and Frank went into the work-shop where all the work was done.

"Did you do all the work yourself?" Harry asked.

"Oh, no. I hired some skilled help in Chicago, and had them work here."

"How about the secret?"

"They never suspected that the craft was to be used out of water."

"Indeed!"

"Yes."

"Well, that is keeping a secret, indeed."

"Yes, and no more surprised men than those four workmen can be found in the United States when they hear that it is flying in the air instead of in the water."

"I should think so," and Harry looked around as if eager to see as much as possible whilst in the place.

It did not take them long to go through the shop, and then they passed out of the inclosure to the house again, where Frank led him into a room he called his armory.

"Here is where father and I keep our guns and ammunition. We have pretty near all the latest inventions in the way of fire-arms. Father is very fond of gunning."

"I should say he was, if this collection is any evidence," said Harry.

"You have some very strange guns, such as I never saw or heard of before."

"Yes. He has bought specimens of every nation he has been to, and some of those weapons came from countries where no other style could be sold or even given away. Show the Arab a Spencer repeating rifle, and prove to him that it is the most deadly weapon in the world, and he will still cling to his old single-barrel, which is as long as a fence rail, as you can see."

In the afternoon they went out for a ride in the open prairie. Frank was as proud of his horse as he was of his invention, and took much delight in showing his paces.

Harry was a lover of horseflesh, too, and was profuse in his praise of the splendid animal Frank was driving.

When they returned home Mr. Reade handed Frank a dispatch, which had come only a few moments before.

Frank tore it open and read it. It was from Banker Thorne, at Cranston, Harry's father, saying:

"Balloon robbery at Midway, in — County this morning. Wind blowing from northeast."

"It's from your father," he said, handing the dispatch to Harry.

"I am going to follow that balloon in ten minutes."

Harry read the dispatch, and then hastened after Frank.

He found him in the work-yard giving hurried orders to Barney O'Shea, an Irishman who was with the elder Reade before young Frank was born.

Barney was hurrying things in first-class style, whilst Pomp, the colored man, was giving a good deal of assistance.

"All aboard!" cried Frank, and Barney and Pomp sprang on board with the agility of a couple of boys.

"Why don't you come on board?" Frank asked of Harry. "What are you standing there for? Ain't you going with us?"

"Why, I never dreamed of going. It's so sudden I hardly know what to think about it."

"Oh, come aboard! What's the odds, anyhow?" and Frank reached out and caught him by the hand, pulling him on board.

"Go into the cabin there and wait till we get under way," Frank said, pushing him into the cabin and closing the door.

Just one minute later, Harry heard a peculiar roaring noise, as of some kind of machinery in operation.

Through the windows of the cabin he saw a great canvas wing spread out and make the motions of a bird in the act of flying. Underneath the wing, he saw something like wings revolving so fast that he could not make out their exact shape.

The next moment he felt the ship shoot upward into the air, and ere he could realize it he was soaring above the houses and tree-tops of Readestown.

Somehow he couldn't help feeling squeamish. He was going up, up toward the clouds, a thing he believed that nature never intended that man should do.

Suddenly, Frank opened the door and looking in at him, asked:

"What makes you so pale?"

"Am I pale?" Harry asked.

"Yes, very."

"Well, I don't feel pale," was the quiet reply.

"You don't, eh?"

"No, not in the least."

"Well, come out here, then, and look down on the world for once in your life."

Harry followed him out, and into the pilot-house where he gazed

out at the world below, far above any height he had ever stood on before.

"Well, what do you think of it?" Frank asked.

"I can't think just now," he replied. "It seems so like a dream to me. Besides I can't help having a feeling of uneasiness. It is hard to realize that we are flying through the air."

"Yes, I suppose it is. But I have believed for a long time that such a thing was possible. This thing is crude and lacking in many things. I know already of some improvements that would make it far more efficient than it now is."

Harry Thorne stood in the pilot-house and looked out on the grand panorama below like one in a dream. It was a sight exceeding anything he had ever dreamed of in grandeur.

"This is worth all I can ever hope to see in the future," he said to Frank after a pause of some minutes.

"You may see something yet that will beat it," remarked Frank very quietly.

CHAPTER III.

TO THE RESCUE.

THE two young friends stood side by side and gazed down at the moving panorama below for some time. Frank held to a wheel not unlike the mariner's wheel by which he guides his ship through the waters, and held the flying-ship on her course.

"I have to hold her on her course with a steady hand," he said to Harry. "The current of the most crooked river in the world does not vary in its direction more than does the air at times. It blows from one point at one moment, and the next from a different one."

"But there are times when it blows steadily in one direction, are there not?"

"Oh, yes. Sometimes a trade wind, as the mariners call it, will blow for weeks in one direction. But we are not in the trade wind now. It is blowing in a southwesterly direction, and that balloon is going in that direction, and that's why we are going straight down south in order to come in sight of them."

"What are you going to do if you find them?" Harry asked him.

"I am going to capture them or destroy the balloon."

"If they won't surrender you will perforate the balloon, eh?"

"Yes."

"That would mean death to them if they were high up, would it not?"

"Undoubtedly."

"There! Look at that river out there! It looks like a long ribbon of silver in the sunlight."

"Yes, it's a beautiful sight," said Frank, gazing at the object pointed out by the youth.

"Bedad!" exclaimed Barney O'Shea, who was sitting in the bow of the air-ship, "it's loike the burruds we are."

"Dat's er fac', Barney," said Pomp, the famous black who had passed through so many adventures with Frank's father, "but we ain't no birds, nohow."

"Sure, but we fly, be the token," was the reply.

"Dat's er fac'," and Pomp looked down below as if he did not much fancy the height he had reached. "Dis nigger don't believ in folks er-flyin', nohow."

"Bedad, it's roight yez are, Pomp," said Barney. "It's mesilf as 'ud loike ter be afther walkin' wid me two fate on the ground this blessed minute."

"Don't worry, Barney," said Frank, who overheard what the two were saying. "We are just as safe up here as we would be down on the ground."

Barney and Pomp had the most implicit faith in Frank, because they knew that in all things he consulted his father, and felt that he would not let him make any mistake in his scientific inventions.

The two servants were fast friends, and yet they would often quickly disagree and sometimes come to blows. Their anger would subside as quickly as it arose, and they would then be fast friends again.

"Which way do you think the balloon will go, Frank?" Harry asked.

"Which ever way the wind blows. They have to go with the wind, you know."

"Yes, so they have. But doesn't the wind blow in different directions in different localities?"

"Sometimes," said Frank. "But we can go in any direction, as we are not dependent on the wind for our motive power. Our greatest trouble will be in finding them. When night comes they will drop down somewhere in a lonely spot, and wait till they can make a haul, and then rise up again."

"Just look at those people down there in that little village! They are greatly excited over our appearance. I wonder what they think of us?"

"You would be astonished to know how superstitious some white people are," said Frank. "They may not be very much given that way down there, but most people, if they have not heard of a flying machine like this, naturally think it is something supernatural."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. The negroes down south would all fall down on their knees and pray and shout, were we to go flying over their heads as we are going now."

The afternoon was now pretty far advanced, and the slanting rays of the sun cast shadows on the ground that could be distinctly seen at the great height at which they were flying.

Frank had a field glass with which he swept the horizon in hopes of being able to catch a glimpse of the balloon he was in pursuit of. But he saw nothing of it.

"What will you do if you don't see it anywhere?" Harry asked.

"Keep on hunting for it," he replied.

"But you can't hunt for it in the darkness of night."

"No. We can stop and wait till morning if we think we are in the right locality."

"Yes. Do you think we ought to be anywhere in sight of the balloon now?"

"I am not sure of that. If the balloon is well up, we ought to be able to see it a great many miles off."

The flying-ship kept on its course southward till it struck another river, a large one way out on the left.

"What river is that?" Harry asked.

"It's the Mississippi."

"I thought so. What a magnificent stream it is."

"Yes, the greatest river in the world in many respects."

It was now growing dark.

The sun had sunk down out of sight, and the evening star made its appearance.

"I am going to drop down in that little patch of prairie near the river there," said Frank. "There are no settlements in miles of it. We won't be bothered with visitors there, and in the morning we can rise on the wing and continue our search."

Harry was deeply interested in the management of the flying-ship, and watched every movement Frank made.

He saw the descent and was charmed with the gentle letting down which was done.

When the flying-ship was settled down in the grass Barney and Pomp sprang out.

They looked carefully to see that no stones were underneath the ship to do her damage, and then Barney hurried off toward the river, whilst Pomp returned on board to prepare supper.

In a little while Barney returned with two good-sized cat-fish which he gave to Pomp.

Half an hour later they sat down to a supper of fresh fish, eggs, butter and coffee.

"This is elegant," said Harry. "I don't think we could fare any better at a first-class hotel."

"You might get a greater variety, but not better fare," replied Frank. "There is no good reason why we should not live well, as we can cook as we go along, and we can carry a goodly quantity of provisions with us."

"Do you think that balloon has settled down for the night anywhere?" Harry asked.

"That is hard to say. They would not be at all likely to go down where the telegraph had warned the people against a balloon. A mob would attack them."

"So you will have to hunt for them at random?"

"Yes. I may stop at some town and telegraph to your father for further information."

"How far do you think we have come to-day?"

"Some forty or fifty miles, I should say," was the reply.

"That is good traveling. How fast can a balloon travel?"

"As fast as the wind blows. It goes with the wind, you know."

Harry laughed and said:

"I might have known that."

"Yes, but you didn't think about it."

"No. Do you know I am thinking about the possibilities of such an invention as this? I don't see why you can't make an immense fortune off of this flying machine."

"Perhaps I may. I've been thinking about it myself."

"It seems to me that the government could use it to great advantage."

"Yes."

Just then a big owl began to hoot in a tree but a few rods away from the ship.

"Hang that owl!" exclaimed Harry. "I'd rather hear any other noise in the word than that."

"Why, that's a serenade. You ought to appreciate it," and Frank laughed.

But Barney got a gun, and went out to see if he could not get a shot at the big hooter.

It was too dark, though, and he had to give it up.

In a little while the owl flew way, and they heard him a half mile away hooting at a mate still farther off.

They went to bed at an early hour, leaving Barney and Pomp to watch the ship, which they did, taking turns at it.

It was a little before sunrise that they awoke, and prepared to rise once more in the air.

"All aboard!" sung out Frank.

They were all on board, but Frank used the precautionary cry to warn all in hearing that the ship was ready to start.

The whirring noise was heard, and in a little while the flying-ship rose in the air.

When it started upward it always went up very fast.

Just a few short minutes were required to raise it a half mile above the earth.

"Oh, what a grand sunrise!" exclaimed Harry, as he saw the sun rising above the eastern horizon. "I never saw anything like that in all my life!"

"It is indeed beautiful!" said Frank. "But I would rather see that balloon rising somewhere in sight."

"Yes, so would I. I guess we'll get a chance at it to-day. Somehow I feel that way."

"Well, I hope you feel right, then."

Pomp soon announced breakfast, and Barney was placed in charge of the wheel, whilst Frank and Harry sat down to the little table in the cabin.

By and by Barney sung out that he saw a balloon.

Frank had just finished his meal, and sprang up to see what the Irishman had found.

"Where is it, Barney?"

"Out there, bedad!" and he pointed in a southeasterly direction to a black spec the size of a man's hat floating lazily about in the air, at least a half mile above the earth.

Frank got his field-glass, and took a look at the object.

"Yes, that's it," he said. "That's a balloon."

"Let me take a look at it," said Harry.

Frank handed him the glass, and he took a look at it.

"Yes, that's a balloon," he said. "But it seems to me to be rather small."

"That's because it's a long ways off," was the reply.

Frank took charge of the wheel now, and made straight for the balloon in the distance.

Harry watched the balloon with an eager interest, whilst Frank held the ship steadily on her course.

When the two were about five miles apart Harry made the discovery, having the glasses in his hands, that the balloon was empty.

"What!" exclaimed Frank. "Do you mean to say that there's no one in the car?"

"Yes, see for yourself," and he handed him the glass.

Frank made the same discovery when he looked.

"Well, something has happened, I guess. We'll go ahead and see what the trouble is, anyhow."

He gave the glass back to Harry and bent all his energy to guiding the flying-ship straight to the balloon.

In due time they came within hailing distance of it.

"There's some one in that car, I am sure," said Frank. "It doesn't swing as though it were entirely empty."

"I was going to remark that myself," said Harry. "But I don't know enough about balloons to be sure."

"Well, we'll see," and Frank guided the ship a little above the balloon in order to enable him to look over into the car, or the big basket which hung below the huge inflated bag of silk.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Harry. "There's a woman lying in the bottom of it!"

Frank made the discovery at the same time.

"Only one, and a woman!" he said, gazing at the car in utter amazement.

"Yes. What does it mean? Call to her!"

"Hello, there—balloon!" cried Frank, in loud tones.

A young woman sprang up in the car and glared at the flying-ship like one in a dream.

"Are you alone?" Frank asked.

She brushed the hair back from her eyes and glared at him as if uncertain whether she was awake or not.

"Are you alone?" Frank asked again.

Then she burst into tears and wept bitterly, finally crying out:

"Oh, save me! Save me, please."

"Save you from what?" Frank asked.

"I can't manage this balloon. My husband and I made an ascension from Iuka yesterday, and while he was trying to arrange some of the ropes last night he fell from the car. We were a half mile high," and she wrung her hands as she told her story, whilst tears streamed down her face.

"Good Heavens, madame!" Frank exclaimed. "That is an awful fate."

"Yes. He was dashed to death, of course, and I could not be with him. Oh, it's horrible. Can't you save me? Can't you stop this balloon?"

"I don't know of but one way, madame," said Frank, "and that is for you to come aboard this flying-ship, and then let me perforate the balloon, so the gas will escape and let it down."

"Oh, if you will!" she cried.

"Of course we will."

"But how can I get on board? Those big wings won't let you get near enough to this car."

"You'll have to tie a rope around you and we will pull you on board."

"Throw me two ropes, please," she said.

"Dar's one, den," said Pomp, throwing her the end of a coil of rope which she deftly caught and securely tied it around her waist.

"Bedad, an' here's anither," put in Barney, tossing her another, which she also caught and tied around her waist.

She then looked over at the four men and asked:

"What must I do now?"

Frank and Harry held to one rope and Barney and Pomp grasped the other.

"Jump overboard and we'll take care of you," replied Frank. "Wait for the word. Steady, now, all! Now, over with you, madam!"

The brave little woman made the jump and swung out into mid-air. Pulling hard on the ropes the four men drew the half-fainting woman up on the deck of the flying ship, where she lay limp and helpless till Frank took her up and conveyed her into the cabin, where he made her drink a wineglass full of brandy.

"Oh, how can I thank you enough!" she cried. "Oh, my poor husband! My poor husband! My poor husband!" and she wrung her hands in an agony of grief, as she lay there on the berth.

Frank thought it best to let her grief find vent before questioning her too closely. He was not altogether satisfied that the balloon was not the one he was in search of. He could not see anything, however, to lead him to think that the woman's grief was not genuine.

By and by she recovered sufficient to talk rationally.

Then she repeated her story that she and her husband had made an ascension the day before at Iuka, in the presence of thousands of people. That during the night her husband had lost his balance and fallen overboard, that she had fallen down in a dead faint in the bottom of the car, and did not know anything more till sunrise."

"Now, do you want me to perforate the balloon, madam, and send it down?"

"Yes, if you can go down too, and let me secure the property."

"Oh, I can do that easy enough," he replied. "Who is the owner of the balloon?"

"I am now, since my husband is no more."

"Who was your husband?"

"He was known as Professor Bardolph, the aeronaut."

"Oh, yes; I remember him," said Harry, who was standing by. I saw him last year. But I don't remember of his being married then."

"No. We have been married but three months," and she burst into a fresh gush of tears.

"Don't cry, madam," said Frank, whose heart was touched by her grief. "You have fallen into the hands of friends. We will go down with you and see that you have all the assistance needed in getting your property cared for, as well as having a search made for the body of your husband."

"Oh, thank you! Thank you!" she cried. "How can I ever thank you enough?"

"Don't worry about that, madame, but just tell us how we can best serve you, and we'll do our best to do as you wish."

They then went outside on the deck and looked at the balloon, which had drifted some hundreds of yards away from the Flying Ship.

"Run up alongside of her again, Barney," said Frank to the Irishman, who was at the wheel.

Barney turned the course of the ship and veered toward the balloon again, whilst Frank went inside and got his rifle.

When within twenty yards or so of the balloon Frank fired at it, and instantly the hissing of the gas as it escaped through the small orifice made by the bullet was heard.

Crack!

Another pair of holes was made, and another and another, after which the great balloon began to go down toward the earth.

"That will sink her," he said as he saw the effect of the shots. "I'll take charge now and go down too."

"He gave the rifle to Harry and took charge of the wheel in order to attend to the task of descending to the earth safely.

The balloon went down almost perpendicularly, as no wind was blowing at the time, and it was their good fortune to descend in the center of an old field which was not cultivated that year.

Barney and Pomp sprang out and ran to the balloon to secure it so as to prevent any damage being done to it.

Madame Bardolph alighted with them and gave orders like one who knew something about what she was doing.

There were several farm-houses in sight of the spot where they went down, and, as might have been expected, in a very little while a crowd of farmers began to assemble.

The old farmer on whose land they had landed, came up to Frank and asked:

"What's all this about?"

"This lady was alone in the balloon after her husband fell out," replied Frank, "and we had to shoot holes in it to let her down and save her life."

"And did her husband fall out of the balloon?"

"Yes, last night, she says."

"Last night!"

"Yes, so she says."

"And has the balloon been up all night?"

"Yes," replied Frank; "ever since yesterday afternoon."

A knot of farmers stood away by themselves, engaged in hurried whispered conversation, shaking their heads and looking very determined.

CHAPTER IV.

A BATTLE WITH EAGLES.

HARRY THORNE noticed the farmers whispering together, and overheard one of them say:

"I'm betting that it's them, the villains!"

"So'm I," assented another.

Then one of them went away.

Half an hour later he returned accompanied by a half dozen men armed with shot-guns.

Frank saw that he was suspected of being the balloon party he was in search of, and told Barney, Pomp and Harry not to make any resistance if arrested.

The man who came up with the armed escort was a constable.

"You are my prisoners, gentlemen," he said. "Surrender, or I'll order my men to fire on you."

"Why, what's the matter with you?" Frank asked, looking the constable in the face.

"There's nothing the matter with me," said the constable. "I arrest you for robbing the bank at Cranston, in Illinois."

Frank laughed, and asked:

"Do you know anything about the balloon robbers? Have you no description of them?"

"Yes, I have," said one of the men with shot-guns. "I have a paper here with a description of the balloon and two of the men in it."

"Read it, please."

The man opened the paper and read the story of the robbery and the singular escape of the robbers. Then followed a description of the two men who had done the robbing, and the crowd soon saw that the description did not refer to anybody who had come down in the flying-ship.

"Now do you think we are the ones you want to arrest, Mr. Constable?" Frank asked.

"Yes, I do," was the reply. "I don't take any stock in a newspaper description. The papers are never more than half right, no how."

"Upon what authority do you arrest me, then?"

"Upon suspicion."

"Is that all?"

"Yes. I am a constable and have that right under the laws of this State."

"Do you give bonds for the faithful discharge of your duty?"

"I do."

"Very well, then. I'll hold your bondsmen responsible for arrest and false imprisonment. I am Frank Reade, Jr., son of Frank Reade, the inventor, and I am in pursuit of the very men you take us for. I built this flying-ship for that purpose. I saw this balloon in the air and chased it till I came up with it, to find this lady in alone; she and her husband, Professor Bardolph, went up from Iuka yesterday. He fell out last night and she has not seen him since. We rescued her. Now if you want to take the chances in arresting us you are at liberty to do so. I will not make any resistance."

The constable seemed to hesitate, and one of the others said to him:

"You had better go slow, Bill."

"I don't want to do anything wrong," said the constable, shaking his head, "but I believe these are the balloon robbers the papers have been telling about."

"So you got your news from the papers, did you?" Frank asked.

"Yes."

"Why do you not take the description from the papers also? You depend upon newspapers when it suits you, and reject them when they don't suit you. I don't intend to be arrested by any such law as that," and he sprang back, drew his revolver and cocked it.

The armed men gave way, as they were not sure that they were in the right, leaving the constable to face Frank alone.

Barney, Harry and Pomp, drew revolvers also, and the constable saw that he had bitten off more than he could chew.

"What are you going to do?" Frank asked, after a pause of a minute or two.

"Nothing," was the reply.

"Very well. You'll find that the safest thing to do. This young man here is the son of the banker who was robbed at Cranston. He is going with me in pursuit of the robbers. This lady is the widow of Professor Bardolph. She will want to hire a wagon to take the balloon to the nearest railroad station. Can any of you accommodate her?"

Not one of the farmers answered him.

"I see that you are all suspicious that we are not all right. Here are letters and telegrams addressed to me. That ought to satisfy you that I am Frank Reade, Jr. You have all heard of my father, or else you are the most ignorant people in the United States."

"Oh, we have all heard tell of him," said one of the farmers.

Just then another man came up, an old country merchant well-known to all of them.

"Hello, Frank!" the old merchant exclaimed on seeing the young inventor. "So it's you, eh?"

"Yes, sir. I'm glad to see you, Mr. Holmes," and Frank grasped

his hand and shook it warmly. "Your neighbors here want to arrest me, taking me to be one of the balloon robbers you have heard so much about in the papers lately."

"That shows that we are all down on robbers here, my boy," said the old merchant.

Then turning to the crowd he added:

"I know this young man's father well. I've been entertained in his house. Every man of you would be proud to know him if you knew the family as I do."

"That's all right," said the crowd.

The constable had nothing to say.

He stalked away without making any apology for what he had done, and Frank turned to Mr. Holmes and invited him to come on board the flying ship.

The merchant accepted the invitation and went all through the ship, after which Frank invited a few more at a time, till all had seen it.

After that every farmer who had a wagon offered it free of charge to Madame Bardolph.

Two hours later a wagon came up and the huge canvas of silk was put in it.

The nearest railroad station was seven miles away, and as the widow was about to climb up on the wagon to go to the depot Frank took her to one side and said to her:

"Pardon me, madame, but I want to inquire if you have money enough to see you through to where you want to go?"

"Thanks, a thousand times," she said. "I have plenty of money for all my wants."

"Very well, so much the better. Money is a mighty good friend in times of trouble."

"Indeed it is. But you have been kinder to me than a million of dollars could have been, and I'll never forget you. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," and he grasped her hand and shook it warmly.

Then she went to Harry and Barney and Pomp, shook each by the hand and then went back to the wagon, where Frank assisted her to the seat by the driver.

The wagon drove off, and the crowd then turned their attention to the flying-ship, and wanted to see it rise and sail away.

They had never seen, heard or dreamed of such a thing before, and were naturally excited over it.

Frank gave them some idea of the construction of the ship and told them that he was on the lookout for the balloon robbers.

"But how are you going to catch 'em if you see 'em?" Mr. Holmes asked.

"Just go right at 'em and tell 'em if they don't surrender and go down we'll shoot holes in their balloon and send them down so fast that their heads will swim. We have four rifles on board and as many shot-guns, and we know how to use them, too."

"Then I guess you'll get 'em if you get near enough to them," said the merchant.

"Indeed we will or we'll send them to earth faster than they ever traveled before."

It was so late in the afternoon when they got the widow of the balloonist off that Frank decided to stay where he was till night and then quietly slip away to some other spot where the presence of the Flying Ship would not be suspected.

He communicated his plans to Harry, who asked:

"What's the matter with staying all night where we are?"

"Just this—we'll have a crowd of young men and women picnicking around here till long after midnight."

"Well, what of that? You don't object to a number of pretty girls being around, do you?"

"Yes, when they have troublesome beaux along who get jealous and want to fight somebody."

"Then why not skip out at once and sail till we find a spot where we can spend the night without interruption?"

"I guess that would be the best plan after all. Besides, I want to stop at some telegraph station and communicate with your father to ascertain whether or not he has had any more news as to the whereabouts of the balloon robbers."

"Yes, and let him know that I am with you," suggested Harry.

"Yes, he ought to know that. There is but one objection to that though."

"What is it?"

"It will be telegraphed all over the country that we are looking for

the balloonists. The villains may hear of it, and lie low till we are out of the way."

"That's so. I never thought of that. But then we can't keep the thing secret very long."

"No, of course not. We may just as well push right ahead and take the chances."

Frank then ordered all the visitors to get off the ship, as she was about to sail.

Every man of them hastened to get away from the ship, and then Harry and Frank proceeded to prepare for an ascension.

"All aboard!" shouted Frank, as a precautionary measure, and the next moment he set the machinery in motion.

The whirl made by the revolver-lifting wings, seemed to frighten some of the farmers, many of whom recoiled a dozen paces or so, as if to make sure of being out of harm's way.

As the ship shot upwards a cry of amazement from the farmers went with it. Such a spectacle was a little too much for them.

"I never expected to live to see sich doins' as that," said one old farmer.

"Nor me, either, neighbor," said another. "Just think of a ship flying through the air like a bird."

"Yes, the end must be near," remarked a third, shaking his head. "When men begin to fly through the air the end of all things is near. They will become so presumptuous that God will wind up the whole thing in disgust."

"Not so bad as that, I hope, neighbor," remarked one. "Maybe He will rebuke man's presumptuous pride by dashing them to pieces from a great height. Suppose something should happen to that ship now, a half mile up in the air? Every soul on board of it would be doomed to certain death."

"Yes, yes, of course," and every man gazed upward at the ship which was sailing grandly away like some immense bird.

They stood there and watched the ship till it seemed like a little speck in the sky. Frank ascended a distance of two miles in order to get a good view of the horizon as far as his vision through a large field glass would reach.

When at the greatest height he surveyed the field and could see no signs of a balloon in any direction.

But the grand panoramic view surpassed anything he had hitherto seen, and as for Harry Thorne, he was in ecstasies over it.

In every direction for many, many miles the scenery was one that could not be described by words of tongue or pen.

Only the brush of a great artist could portray an idea of its grandeur. Rivers, forests and plains came into view in a moving panorama as the ship sailed southward at that great height.

The sun sank low down in the western horizon, and Frank began to look around for a suitable place at which to spend the night.

"I see an eagle coming toward us," said Harry, pointing toward an immense eagle a half-mile away bearing down upon the ship.

"Get your gun, and perhaps you may get a shot at him," said Frank.

"Do you think he will get near enough for that?"

"Yes, they are very bold in the air. I've heard my father say that he has had to defend himself from them in the air."

Harry ran inside the cabin and got out a shot-gun and came back with it just as the eagle was coming within range.

Suddenly the great bird seemed to comprehend the fact that he was not the king of the air whilst such a thing as a flying-ship was on the wing. He gave a scream of defiance, and attempted to fly over the ship, as if intending to pounce upon it from his greater height.

Harry raised his gun, took a quick aim and fired.

The shot broke the eagle's left wing, and with a shrill scream he came tumbling down on to the deck of the ship, which he struck with a thud that nearly knocked the life out of him.

"Good! Good!" cried Frank, in great delight. "That was a good shot!"

Harry ran over to the eagle to take a good look at him, and the great bird scrambled to his feet and gave another defiant scream.

"Look out, dar!" cried Pomp, who knew something about the pluck of eagles. "Don't let 'im git his claws in yer meat. Dey am bad uns, Marse Harry."

"You had better take Pomp's warning," said Frank to him, "and keep out of his reach. They are worse than tigers about fighting. That one is a huge fellow and very dangerous."

Harry walked around the wounded bird, and admired him. The eagle turned so as to face him, and screamed defiance at him as fiercely as if he were still on the wing.

Barney and Pomp tried to make a prisoner of him, but the great bird was too full of fight to allow it.

"Let him alone," said Frank, "and he'll make himself at home when he finds out that he can't fly."

But he gave a defiant scream once in awhile, and the result was the appearance of two more.

"Get a shot at 'em if you can," said Frank.

The wounded eagle's screams had the effect to bring the other two within range, and a well-aimed shot sent him tumbling to earth.

"Very good! Now for the other one!" cried Frank.

Harry fired at the remaining one, peppering him from head to tail, but hitting no vital spot. Many feathers were cut loose from him. He screamed shrilly and sailed away, evidently satisfied with his dose.

"That isn't bad work for an amateur," said Frank, laughing. "Two out of three shows well, and eagles at that."

By this time the sun had gone almost below the horizon.

Frank had selected a clearing near the banks of a river and was going to descend, when he saw a group of houses about a mile south of it.

"That won't do," he said, and he went on farther, finally settling down in another place.

"This will do," he said, and Pomp proceeded to prepare the evening meal for the party.

As soon as he found himself so near the earth the wounded eagle proceeded to leave the ship and get on *terra firma*.

Pomp and Barney kept an eye on him, for they did not intend to lose him by any means. They had made up their minds that they would amputate the broken wing and trust to its healing.

The eagle climbed up on a log, and seemed to have made up his mind to stay there all night.

The night waned, and Frank, Harry and Barney had retired, leaving Pomp on guard for the first half of the night.

Suddenly Pomp heard the eagle scream, and a moment later a yelp and whine told him that something lively was going on out there by that log.

Pomp sprang to the ground and ran over there to find that the eagle was engaged in a deadly combat with a fox.

Reynard had taken the national bird for a chicken, a fowl all his race have a fondness for, and the eagle was teaching him all about the mistake.

"De lorgorramity!" exclaimed Pomp, "dat fox done gone an got hisself in er fix! Dat eagle am a clawin' all de hide offen 'im, suah!"

They made such a racket that the sleepers on board the ship were awakened.

Frank came out on deck but half dressed.

"What's the matter out there, Pomp?" he asked.

Pomp chuckled and said:

"De fox come fo' ter eat de eagle, an' de eagle is er eatin' 'im, Marse Frank."

Both Frank and Harry sprang to the ground and ran over to where the fox and eagle were having it out.

The eagle had the fox by the shoulder and neck with both feet, and was using his terrible beak on him for all he was worth.

Reynard yelped, snapped and made desperate efforts to dislodge his enemy, but the eagle held on and cut right and left. Over and over they rolled in the grass, both uttering cries, the eagle's fierce and defiant, the fox's full of pain and fear.

"By George, but it's the worst fight I ever saw," said Harry.

"Yes, the fox is getting the worst of it," said Frank.

"Dat's er fac'," said Pomp. "Dat fox done gone an' tackle de wrong bird, shuah."

The fight lasted fully ten or fifteen minutes, when the fox suddenly gave up the fight and ceased to resist. The eagle cut him deep with his beak, and the doomed Reynard kicked convulsively as if he regarded it useless to try to do anything else.

"Dat's er gone fox, shuah," said Pomp.

"Yes, the eagle whipped him in a fair fight, and has a broken wing besides," said Frank.

"He's a game one," said Harry. "We ought to cut off that broken wing, and take him along with us. He's the gamest bird I ever saw."

"Yes. We can manage him in some way to-morrow," returned Frank.

They went back to bed and left the eagle to his feast, which they thought he had fairly won.

When they awoke in the morning, they found the eagle perched on the log, and nothing but a remnant of the fox on the ground near by.

After breakfast they set to work to lasso the eagle, and make a prisoner of him. He fought like a tiger, but they were too many for him. He was tied up so he could not use his claws or beak.

Then Frank cut the wing off at the second joint, after which he was released with a cord around one leg to confine him to the deck of the ship.

That done, they proceeded to rise in the air and continue their journey southward.

But two hours later they descended in the outskirts of a town on the line of a railroad, where Frank went to the telegraph office to inquire of Mr. Thorne at Cranston if he had heard anything farther from the balloon.

"It was seen in Central Missouri yesterday," came back the reply.

Frank then telegraphed that Harry was with him and well, after which he returned to the ship to find that a mob had surrounded it and demanded its surrender.

CHAPTER V.

A BALLOON SIGHTED.

HARRY, Barney and Pomp, were all on deck, guns in hand, and holding the crowd at bay. The excitement was intense, and many rough-looking men were threatening to fire if they did not surrender.

Frank elbowed his way through the crowd, and climbed to the deck ere they knew who he was.

"What does all this mean?" he demanded of the excited men around him.

"It means that if you don't surrender you'll get more lead than you can carry away," said a tall, determined looking man, who seemed to be a leader among them.

"What do you want to make us prisoners for?" Frank asked. "Just let me know what the trouble is, and then I can tell you whether or not we will surrender."

"You are the balloon robbers, and if you don't surrender we'll riddle you right here."

"Do you call this thing a balloon?" Frank asked, looking down at the fellow and smiling at him. "This is nothing like a balloon. It's a flying-ship, and we are on the hunt for the balloon. I've just been to the telegraph office to telegraph to Banker Thorne if he had heard any news of the balloon. Here is his answer. As we are not in a balloon we are not going to surrender. If you want to have a fight you can have it. I've as much right to arrest you as you have to arrest me."

"I told yer it wasn't no balloon, Joe," said one of the men at the back of the spokesman of the mob.

"Of course it isn't a balloon," said Frank. "The man who calls a flying-ship a balloon ought to be taken up by his friends and clapped into a lunatic asylum."

That produced a laugh at the expense of the spokesman of the mob, who retorted:

"If you think I am a blooming idiot, come outen that thingamajig an' tackle me."

"My dear sir, I have something else to do besides tackling idiots in every town we strike. I have just received a dispatch that hurries us off to the central part of the State. I hope you have friends enough here to take care of you. Start her up, Barney."

Barney was in the pilot house, and immediately set the machinery in motion. The crowd nearest to the ship scattered, and as the roaring increased some of them ran over each other in their eagerness to get out of the way.

The flying ship ascended to a great height, and Frank took his field glass and scanned the horizon in the direction of the southwest.

"Those fellows have got wind of this flying ship through telegraphic communication in some way, and are making off to a section of country where the telegraph does not go."

"It looks a little that way," said Harry.

"Yes. They may go away out into the southwest where telegraph

wires run only along with the railroads. They can go from town to town, then, robbing and plundering with impunity."

"That is their game, I guess."

"No doubt of it."

They pushed on into the great State of Missouri, and when night came on they could see no opening where they could land save in a cultivated field.

"That won't do," said Frank. "The farmer would have the right to have us arrested for trespass and damage to his crop. We want to avoid everything of that kind."

"What shall we do, then—fly all night?"

"Better do that than get the name of being as bad as the men we are in pursuit of."

They found an old uncultivated field, however, near the banks of an old mill-pond, and descended there. It was a lonely-looking spot, but answered the purposes of our heroes admirably.

Pomp had supper ready by the time they were settled down, and they fell to and ate heartily of the fare he had prepared for them.

But they were not there over an hour when four negroes came down to the pond to fish.

The darkies built up a big fire near the water's edge and began to haul in the fish. They had not seen the flying ship back from the water a hundred yards or so.

To have some fun at their expense Frank decided to turn an electric light on them, aided by a powerful reflector.

The moment the four darkies saw the electric light, they were partially blinded by its brilliant glare.

"Wha—what's dat, Eben?" one of them exclaimed, dropping his pole and gazing at the blinding light like one terribly confused.

"Dunno; Mose," replied Eben. "Neber seed dat light afo'."

"I'se er gwine home," exclaimed the third darky, in faltering tones, and he started to make a break.

"Don't get scared, boys," called out Frank, in clear, but kindly tones. "We are friends."

"Who—who dat!" called out Eben.

"Fishermen, like yourselves," said Frank.

Pomp then went down to where the four fishermen were, and told them that his three white friends were camping there for the night, and that they would like to do some fishing too.

That quieted them, and they resumed their poles and began to catch great numbers of catfish.

Barney joined them and bought a good-sized fish for the eagle, which had been named "Uncle Sam."

The eagle would not eat it till morning, when he pounced upon it and devoured it with avidity.

The return of day brought the four fishermen back to the pond. Two dogs accompanied them, one of which, a very inquisitive pup, ran up the gang-plank to the deck of the ship.

Two minutes' rambling around brought him within reach of the eagle.

Suddenly the welkin rang with the yelps of that pup.

"Uncle Sam" had given him a clutch with his claws, and he made a break for safety, with the eagle holding on to him.

When he reached the end of the line which held the eagle to the deck the latter's grip tore loose and the pup was free.

But he never ceased running and yelping till he reached home, somewhere back in the woods.

"Wha' dat hurtin' dat dog?" Eben asked as he saw the pup making a break for home.

"Dat's er game chicken," said Pomp, laughing.

"Chicken!" exclaimed Eben.

"Yes—er game chicken—what no nigger kin snatch offen de roost."

"G'way dar!"

"Dat's er fac'," said Pomp, "an' youse kin hab 'im ef youse snatch 'im an' take 'im home wid you."

Frank was about to stop the racket, but was too late.

Eben started up the gang-plank and reached for "Uncle Sam," and the bird reached for him in return.

"Ouch! Ugh! Take 'im off!" yelled the darky, leaping about the deck like a madman and trying to part company with the eagle.

"Knock 'im off, Pomp!" cried Frank, who did not sympathize with a practical joke of that kind.

Eben ran so far back, however, that the line to which the eagle was tied pulled them apart.

The yells of the negro and the shrill screams of the eagle raised quite a racket for a few minutes.

"What kinder chicken am dat, sah?" Mose asked, turning to Frank.

"That's an eagle."

"A eagul! De Lor' sabe us, I'se gwine ter kill dat nigger," and he made a break for Pomp to thrash him for saying that it was a chicken.

Pomp was grinning from ear to ear, and not expecting an attack till Mose had given him a blow that made him grunt.

"Looke heah, you nigger," yelled Pomp, "what youse do dat for?"

Mose made another pass at him without making any other reply.

Pomp prepared at once for war.

His heavy ordnance was his head, and he brought it to bear on the belligerent Mose.

He lowered it, and made a forward dash.

He collided with Mose, his head striking him in the pit of the stomach, and the belligerent darky went to grass, knocked out utterly.

"Wha' fo' youse hit me, you nigger!" Pomp cried.

But Mose was not in a condition to answer any questions just then. He was quite oblivious of his surroundings at that moment.

Eben was rubbing the wound the eagle had given him, and did not care to do any more fooling.

"Come aboard, Pomp, and let's be off," called out Frank.

Pomp and Barney both went on board, and then the lifting machinery began to roar, the great wings expanded, and the negroes' eyes nearly popped out of their heads.

But when the flying ship shot up in the air the four negroes were so terrified that they fell on their knees and began to shout and pray like religious lunatics.

Barney and Pomp laughed heartily at their fright, and waved the American flag at them till they were fully a mile high, after which they turned their attention to their other duties.

About noon of that day Frank caught sight of a balloon in the distance and went for it with all the speed he could put into the flying ship.

"I guess that's the balloon we are after," he said, as he took another look at it.

"Let me have a peep at it," said Harry, taking the glass from Frank and leveling it at the little object in the distance.

He gazed for more than two minutes and then said:

"I guess you are right. That must be the balloon."

"I am quite sure of it. But I don't like that thunder cloud coming up out there. If we have a wind storm it may spoil the pursuit."

"How so?"

"The balloon can go with the wind without any trouble. But this ship has wings which a violent wind might wrench and render useless."

"And if it should?" Harry asked, his face blanching.

"Well, we won't be able to catch the balloon, that's all," was the quiet reply.

"We'd catch the earth though, wouldn't we?"

"Yes—the whole earth."

"We'd make a hole in it, would we not?"

"Hardly. We'd simply flatten out like pancakes," and Frank smiled quietly as he made the remark.

From that moment Harry kept his eye on that black cloud which was coming up from the southeast.

It was a very threatening cloud and seemed to grow blacker as it rose higher. By and by the ship began to show signs of feeling the fitful gusts of wind that came from the cloud.

"The balloon was some eight or ten miles ahead when the ship began to feel the wind, and Frank noticed that the balloon was showing increased speed also.

"What are you going to do?" Harry asked.

"I am going to follow that balloon as long as I can with any degree of safety," was the reply.

"All right. I am willing to run as much risk as you are."

Frank grasped his hand and shook it warmly, saying:

"That's the spirit of a brave man. I am not going to risk our lives recklessly, you may depend."

"I am sure of that."

The wind increased in violence and the ship rocked from side to side as if in trouble.

At one time it made a plunge as if about to take a header toward the earth, and Pomp came near losing his balance and going overboard. He saved himself by grasping a piece of rope which was fastened to a ringbolt.

The balloon was rising higher and higher, whirling around like a top at times at the mercy of the wind.

The ship came within a mile of it, when they could count the number of men in the car.

"There are four of 'em there," said Harry.

"Yes, four. That's a pretty heavy load, but it's a big balloon."

"Yes—ouch! Look out!"

The ship made another lurch and Harry was hurled against the side of the pilot-house with great force.

"By George!" exclaimed Frank. "We'll have to descend. Another wrench like that and something may give way," and he began to lower the number of revolutions of the lifting wings.

The ship descended, and as it neared the earth the violence of the wind seemed to decrease.

A large field of growing corn lay just below them, and they had to land there, having no option in the matter.

It struck harder than Frank designed, and Harry was thrown to the floor by the force of it.

"I hope no damage is done," Harry said, as he picked himself up.

"So do I," added Frank, "but I am afraid that something has given away."

Barney and Pomp immediately sprang overboard to see if any damage was done. But ere they could make any special inspection a great down-pour of rain began, and they had to get on board again.

The rain came down in such torrents, that sight of the now fast receding balloon was cut off entirely.

The eagle sat bolt upright in the rain as it pattered down on the deck. The others gathered in the cabin to wait for the rain to cease.

"The farmer who owns this cornfield, will want damages for the crushing of his corn," remarked Frank, as he looked out through the window of the cabin.

"Yes," added Harry, "and will demand ten times as much as the damage amounts to."

"Of course. We won't spoil as much as a peck of corn, but he'll want ten dollars, or more, for it all the same."

"The balloon will get away from us."

"I am afraid so. The wind will blow them many a mile. They can't make a landing as we did, for they can't close up the balloon so as to prevent it dragging."

"Their safety depends upon their keeping up above the earth, I suppose?"

"Yes, for they can strike no snags there."

Frank waited impatiently for the rain to cease, for he was anxious to resume the chase of the balloon.

The wind continued with the rain for some time. But it ceased ere the rain ended.

He made a close inspection, however, in spite of the rain, and found that nothing had been broken.

"We are lucky," he said after he had satisfied himself that no damage had been done to the ship.

"Yes, indeed," assented Harry. "If we can get away before the farmer puts in his appearance with his bill for damages, we'll have some more good luck."

The rain slackened, and Frank swept the horizon with his glass for a glimpse of the balloon.

"It's gone," he said. "But we'll overtake it again. But for that wind-storm we'd have overhauled it and forced a surrender."

"Yes, I believe we would. But we have to take our chances on that."

"So we have. It's pretty well over now. The clouds are breaking away back there, and but little wind is blowing now."

"I am going to rise in a few minutes," said Frank. "I am waiting for the wind to cease entirely."

A few minutes later Frank went out to the pilot-house and looked around.

Over on the right some 300 yards away, he saw a farmer with his hired men, coming toward the ship.

The farmer had his inevitable shot gun.

"All aboard!" shouted Frank as a notice to Harry and the others that he was going to start the machinery.

"Let her go!" returned Harry.

The next moment the whirl and roar of the machinery were heard, and a little later the ship rose in the air.

The farmer and his men were utterly dumfounded. They stopped and stared up after the ascending ship, as if unable to understand how such things could be.

"We have done him no harm," said Harry, "as not a dozen hills of corn were destroyed."

"Say about two dozen, and you will hit it right," remarked Frank.

The farmer was seen gesticulating frantically till he was too far away for him to be noticed by those on board the ship.

"I wonder if the balloon passed through the storm all right?" said Harry.

"I don't see why they should not," replied Frank. "All they had to do was to sail before the wind. As long as they keep above the earth they are safe."

"Have you any idea how fast the wind blew at its best when we came down?"

"I guess it was fully sixty miles an hour."

"Whew! And we were down in that corn field over two hours!"

"Yes, giving them another start of over 100 miles," remarked Frank.

"Well, that's a good start to have, I should say."

"Yes. But we can go in any direction we please, whilst they have to go with the wind. That is so much in our favor."

"So it is. Well, we may catch up with them again in a day or two."

The ship went in the direction the wind was blowing, and ere night came on they had placed nearly 100 miles between them and the spot where they last saw the balloon.

"We may as well drop down there by that stream," said Frank. "There's an open prairie near it, where we may be able to find some game in the morning."

They dropped down near a small river and found it to be a lonely spot indeed. A flock of prairie hens rose on the wing and flew about one hundred yards.

Pomp's mouth watered for prairie chicken. Chicken was his favorite dish at all times, so he suggested that some of the wild fowls be secured for supper and breakfast.

Harry and Frank took their guns and went in pursuit of the hens. A half dozen shots brought down four, and Barney came out to where they were to get the game.

With the instincts of a true sportsman Harry suggested that they follow up the flock and get a few more. Frank agreed, as the twilight had not yet set in.

Three more fat hens was the result, and Barney took charge of them and carried them to Pomp.

When he reached the deck of the ship he was attacked by a couple of bearded white men, who covered him with revolvers and ordered him to hold up his hands.

"Phwat's the matther wid yez?" Barney demanded, gazing at the two strangers in astonishment.

"Hold up your hands or I'll make holes in you!" hissed one of the men.

Barney had to obey.

"He had no other recourse, as he didn't want to have any 'holes' made in him."

"Great Scott!" gasped Harry. "There's two men on the deck there holding Barney up!"

Frank glared at the scene like one in a dream.

"Yes," he said, "and they have tied Pomp up too, I guess. We have our revolvers and shot-guns, and they have our rifles. We'll have to get into the woods to save ourselves."

"Yes—come!" and they made a break for the woods, which they reached after a two minutes' run.

"We are safe now," said Frank. "We can creep up near enough to get a shot at them if they show themselves out on deck."

They crept forward to the ship under cover of the trees, till they got within forty yards of it. There they halted and watched the two men, who were inside the cabin.

They could be seen through the windows, and our heroes made the discovery that two more were in there, showing at least four foes they would have to conquer ere they regained possession of the ship.

"This is bad business," whispered Frank to Harry. "I don't know

what to think of it. I don't know whether they are the balloon crowd or not. But whoever they are, they are going to fight for the ship. They may have an idea that Pomp or Barney may be able to run the ship, and thus hope to get it for their own use."

"Why can't we pick 'em off when it grows darker?" Harry asked.

"Just what I am going to try to do," was the reply.

CHAPTER VI.

BARNEY AND POMP IN TROUBLE.

A FEW minutes after Frank and Harry left the ship with their guns, Pomp took up a pail and went to the river for water. He dipped it full and turned to retrace his footsteps, when he found himself confronted by two men, who leveled cocked revolvers at his head.

"Drop that bucket, and hold up your hands!" said one of them in hoarse tones.

Pomp had been in many a tight place before, and knew that when a man got the drop on him his only chance lay in obeying orders.

He dropped the pail and held up both hands, pretending to be terribly frightened as he did so.

"Wha—what's de matter, sah?" he faltered, as he held them above his head.

"There's nothing the matter if you behave yourself," was the reply. "But any attempt to get away will be your last minute on earth. Don't you forget that, my good man."

"No, sah, I'se gwine ter be er good nigger, sah."

"Well, if you don't you'll be a dead nigger, that's all. Is there anybody on board that flying-machine now?"

"No, sah."

"Do you know how to run it?"

"No, sah."

"Sure of that?"

"Yes, sah."

"Does the other man—the Irishman, know?"

"No, sah."

Pomp did not hesitate to tell a direct lie in the interest of his employer, for he saw that he would be forced at the muzzle of a pistol to run the ship if it was known that he *could* run it.

"Then we'll have to catch one of the others," said the man who did the talking.

"Yes," said the companion with him, "and we'll have to look out for a fight, as they both have guns."

"Oh, we can down one of them and cover the other. He'll throw up his hands quick enough when we get the drop on him."

They walked Pomp back to the ship, where they tied his hands behind him, and told him that if he made any outcry, or gave any signal of danger, they would kill him on the spot.

He was made to lie down in his berth in the cabin, and one of the ruffians watched over him, whilst two others laid in wait for Barney as he came back with the prairie hens.

Barney was bagged as easily as Pomp was, and hurried inside the cabin, where he was bound and made to lie down in his berth.

Then they prepared for the capture of Frank and Harry.

"Be the powers, av yez capthure thim I'll ate the ship," said Barney, who was supremely disgusted at the way he had been bagged.

"Keep quiet!" hissed one of the men on guard.

It grew darker, and Frank and Harry drew nearer to the ship.

One man stood out on the deck and kept a close watch on the woods, for they had seen Frank and Harry take shelter there.

By and by a rain storm threatened, and it grew so dark that nothing could be seen save the light in the cabin.

Frank whispered to Harry:

"We must go up there now and see what is going on. We may be able to get a shot at them through the windows."

They crept forward till the hull of the ship was reached.

A flash of lightning revealed a man on the deck on guard.

His face was toward the cabin, hence he did not see them.

By a very careful move Frank got a sight of him, and at a distance of five or six feet gave him the contents of one of the barrels of his shot gun.

The man fell without a groan.

But the report brought the other two out in hot haste to the assistance of their companion.

As they opened the door of the cabin they were plainly revealed to Harry and Frank, who fired point blank at them.

They both fell right at the threshold, and Barney gave a whoop—a wild Irish whoop—for he knew that the end was near.

The fourth man sprang to his feet in the cabin and leveled his revolver at Barney's head, hissing:

"Another sound from you and you are a dead man!"

Frank opened the door and leveled his revolver at the man, who turned ashen hued in the face.

Harry covered him also with his gun, one barrel of which was loaded.

"Drop that gun and hold up your hands!" ordered Frank.

The order was promptly obeyed and then Barney gave another whoop.

Pomp sprang up and sang out:

"Cut me loose, Marse Harry! Cut me loose—quick!" and he turned round so as to let Harry see how his hands were tied behind him.

Harry very promptly cut him loose, and then performed the like service for Barney.

"Whoop! Lave 'im to me!" yelled Barney. "Lave me git at im, the spalpeen!" and he charged on the ruffian and gave him a staggering blow in the face with his fist.

The man recovered himself quickly and drew an ugly-looking knife. He would have ended Barney's career then and there, had not Pomp made a charge on him.

Pomp's woolly head struck him in the side, and sent him clear through the cabin door to the floor of the deck.

He rolled against Uncle Sam, the eagle, and the fierce bird at once fastened on to him.

Then he yelled.

The eagle screamed.

"Whoop!" yelled Barney, taking down the lantern inside and bringing it out so as to get a sight of the combat. "Lave the aigle be! Lave the aigle be! Bedad, but it's a foine birrud for a ruction, he is!"

The man rose to his feet, having lost his knife when he was butted out of the cabin, and grappled with the eagle.

He got hold of its neck and gave it a wrench that broke it.

That ended the fight.

Victor though he was the man was a sight to look at.

The eagle's beak and claws had done terrible work, for he was bleeding from a score of small wounds.

He was sullen and defiant.

"Hold out your hands, sir," said Frank, leveling his pistol at him.

"You've got the drop on me," said the ruffian, as he held his hands out.

"Yes, of course. Barney, tie him hard and fast."

"Yir, sorr," and Barney procured a cord with which he tied him securely.

"Now, what does all this mean?" Frank demanded of the prisoner.

It means that you've won the game," was the reply.

"Yes; but what was the game? Why did you seize my property in the way you did?"

"Because we wanted it ourselves."

"Yes. I might have known that much. Do you belong to the balloon gang?"

"Balloon gang! I don't know nothing about no balloon gang."

"You haven't had anything to do with a balloon?"

"No. Are you a lunatic? What's a balloon got to do with this game, I'd like to know?"

"Have you seen a balloon anywhere in the last day or two?"

"No," and the man looked as though he really believed Frank to be crazy.

"Are you sure of that?"

"Yes, I am. What do you think a balloon would be doing away out here, I'd like to know?"

"It would be trying to get away from us, I guess," replied Frank.

"We are looking for a balloon with four men in it,"

"We were four men, but I don't know nothing about any balloon."

"Well, I'll see if I can't find out something more about it in the morning," said Frank. "We'll have to keep you tied up till then."

"I'm in a pretty bad fix to be tied up, mister," the man said.

"That eagle put in some hot work while he was at it."

"Yes, he did, and I am sorry he didn't finish you so you could keep company with your three companions."

The prisoner did not say anything more. He knew that he had nothing upon which to base a claim for consideration at the hands of the two young men.

Pomp and Barney took up the bodies of the three robbers and laid them out on the grass. Barney then brought pails of water from the river and washed away all signs of the tragedy, whilst Pomp busied himself with the delayed preparations for supper.

During the evening Frank, by dint of close questioning, managed to get some information out of his prisoner.

They were a part of Quantrell's old guerrillas, who turned highwaymen after the war, and had long been a terror to the sparsely settled sections of the State.

"I have done no wrong then," said Frank, with some degree of satisfaction.

"No," added Harry. "I guess the State would strike a medal in our honor if it were known that we had wiped out three of the villains."

Frank smiled and the prisoner looked gloomy enough.

Barney and Pomp took turns at standing guard during the night.

When morning came Frank and Harry found the four horses belonging to the four villains, and knew then that they were not in any way connected with the balloon rascals.

"That lets him out," said Frank to Harry.

"Yes. But what shall we do with him? We can't hang him or take him out and shoot him."

"No, nor do we want him with us in the ship. I guess he is punished enough as he is. Uncle Sam went for him for all he's worth."

"Yes, and I am very sorry he was killed. I expected to have that eagle with us all through this trip."

"So did I. He was as game as any I ever saw."

"He was a terror. I never saw anything like it."

Breakfast being over, Frank said to the prisoner.

"We are going to resume our trip. We don't care to be bothered with you. If we release you will you bury your companions and then stop this sort of business?"

"Yes, and I'll swear it, too."

"Of course we expected to hear you say that. I suppose you'd promise to go and hang yourself to get away from the officers of the law?"

"Yes, any fool would."

Frank laughed heartily and told him he could go, and then he turned and entered the pilot-house where he set the machinery in motion.

The ship shot up into the air and bore away in the direction the balloon had gone.

The solitary would-be robber was seen standing in the prairie, gazing up at the ascending ship, as if rooted to the spot.

"He has had an experience he will not soon forget," said Frank.

"He may make up his mind that his business does not pay."

"I am not sure of that. He will leave the three men unburied and will sell their horses and saddles and pocket the money."

"Of course he will—and then skip out of the country to escape the vengeance of the rest of the gang."

They sailed all day long, and then encamped near a small lake, where they found fish and game abundant.

On the next day they came in sight of a balloon in the distance, but not in the direction of the one they were in search of.

"How came it out there, I wonder?" said Harry.

"That's hard to tell," was the reply. "But we'll see if we can't get nearer to them than we did the other day."

They made direct for the balloon, which was many miles away. After two hours they were near enough for Frank to see that there were only two persons in the car.

"They must have lost two of their gang during that storm the other evening," he said, handing the glass to Harry, who leveled it at the balloon.

Harry looked long and steadily at those in the car, and finally said:

"A man and a woman!"

"Eh!"

"A man and a woman are all there are in it. I don't think it is the balloon we are looking for at all."

"You don't?"

"No. This one looks newer and brighter than the other one did."

Frank took another look at it, and then said:

"You may be right, but I'll make sure of it, anyway. We have the right to suspect every balloon we see now."

"Yes, there's no harm in that."

The ship drew nearer and nearer to the balloon, till the faces of the man and woman could plainly be seen.

"What balloon is that?" Frank asked.

"Professor Noel's of St. Louis," was the reply.

"Where bound?"

"California, if the wind is kind to us."

"How many are on board?"

"Only two—my wife and myself. What sort of a machine is that?"

"It's a flying-ship."

"Where from?"

"Readestown."

"Ah! You are Frank Reade, then?"

"Frank Reade, Jr."

"Well, it's all the same. Can you go against the wind?"

"Yes, if it is not too strong."

By this time the ship had come alongside the balloon, so the two could look into the carriage and see that only the professor and his wife were on board.

"Have you seen any other balloon lately, professor?" Frank asked, after a pause of some moments.

"No, I have not."

"We are looking for one—the balloon robbers."

"Ah! I heard of them before we left St. Louis."

"We are in pursuit of them. We were within a mile of them the other day when a storm separated us and enabled them to get away. We had to go down in order to avoid having our wings wrenched by the fierce wind. Where the balloon went to we don't know."

"The wind is veering round to the northeast again," remarked the professor, "and as I don't want to go to Mexico I'll have to settle down and wait for it to change again."

"I think you make a mistake, professor," remarked Frank. "Go southwest and then tack northwest and you'll find yourself gaining all the time."

"Yes, I am aware of that fact, but I want to go as near straight across the continent as possible."

After a little more talk the four men on board the ship gave the professor and his wife three hearty cheers and sheered off.

"Which way now?" Harry asked.

"Across the wind," was the reply. "That storm blew them somewhere out here, and I am going to hang on till I see them."

Just as the sun was sinking below the horizon they caught a glimpse of a western border town on the banks of a river.

"There's where I want to stop to-night," said Frank, "if we can do so without being seen."

"Why?"

"To telegraph for information if there is any telegraph office there."

"There's a good place to land below the town," said Harry, looking through the glass. "But it will be very dark ere we can reach it."

"Just what I want. I want to drop down there and walk into town without the presence of the ship being suspected by any one. We don't want the whole population turning out to bother us about the thing."

Darkness came on, and the lights of the town alone enabled Frank to locate it and guide the ship to the spot where he wanted to land.

"Don't light a single lamp, Pomp," Frank ordered. "We'll see if we can't get along without any light to-night."

Half an hour later Frank slowed up and began to settle down.

They did not strike the place they had calculated on, for they could see the lights of several houses on the outskirts of the town from the deck of the ship, after it settled down.

"Now, Barney," he said to the Irishman, "Harry and I are going up into the town. You and Pomp remain here, and don't let anybody come on board till we come back."

"Yis, sorr," replied Barney.

"Come on, Harry. Let's go and see what we can find out about this place."

Harry and Frank left the ship and made their way through the darkness toward the lights in one of the houses near by.

When they reached the gate they found themselves in a road. !

"Now we can get into the town without any trouble," said Harry, as they struck the road.

"Yes, but how the deuce will we be able to find the ship again in the dark?" Frank said, stopping and looking around. "When we come back the lights in that house may be all out. We'd never be able to find the ship without a signal light."

"That's as true as gospel," said Harry.

"Of course it is. We must go back and tell Barney to hang out a red light. Nobody would notice it out here, or if it was noticed no one would have interest enough in it to follow it up."

They returned to the ship and told Barney to hang out a red signal light after they had been gone an hour or so.

Then they came away and again started up the road toward the town.

A walk of about a half mile brought them into the heart of it.

They found several saloons in full blast, and a crowd of rough-looking border men in them, drinking, smoking, singing, and otherwise making merry.

"Quite a lively little town," remarked Frank as he looked around the place.

"Yes, and the saloon business seems to be the principal one, too," remarked Harry.

"That's the case with all border river towns," said Frank. "I am going to inquire for the telegraph office."

He went into a saloon and bought a cigar for himself, whilst Harry remained outside, and asked the saloon keeper if such an office was in the town.

"No," was the reply. "Every galoot in this town is er whole telegraph himself. We don't need no telegraph in this ere town, mister."

"Who wants er telegraph?" asked a man somewhat under the influence of drink, coming up to the bar alongside of Frank.

"I do," said Frank, very promptly. "I wanted to send a dispatch to New York."

"Why don't you write? Hang the telegraph! Gimme a glass o' cold 'pisen,' Joe."

The barkeeper set out a black bottle and two glasses, asking Frank what he was drinking.

"I never drink," replied Frank.

The man who had called for the drink looked hard at the sun-browned face of the young man, and remarked:

"Never drink, eh?"

"No, I never drink liquors of any kind."

"Wal, you'll drink a glass o' cold 'pisen' with Bill Moss," and he shoved the bottle over toward him after filling his glass.

Frank deliberately turned away and started toward the door.

"Say, you!" called out the man, grabbing him by the arm and pulling him suddenly around. "You drink with me or I'll fill you full of lead! Do yer hear me?"

"And I suppose you want me to pay for it, too, don't you?" Frank very coolly asked.

"Yes, you tenderfoot. Drink or you'll never see sunrise agin!"

"Landlord, what's the liquor in that bottle worth?"

"One dollar," was the reply.

Frank promptly threw down a dollar on the bar, drew his revolver, cocked it and leveled it at the head of Bill Moss.

"You overgrown prairie dog!" he hissed. "If you don't raise that bottle and swallow every drop in it without flinching, I'll make as many holes in you as ever a wasp nest had! Drink, I say!"

The bully was dumfounded at the sudden change in the personality of the youth. But he was not the only one astonished. The barkeeper and all the spectators were equally amazed.

He had the drop on Bill, and Bill concluded that the best thing for him to do was to take a drop on himself. So he turned up the black bottle, which was nearly full of the miserable western whisky, and drank down every drop of its contents.

"Now, do you want any more out of me?" Frank asked, looking him full in the face.

"No," stammered the bully. "I've got a week's drunk in me now."

"Then cut a notch on your ear to remind you that you are liable to make a mistake sometimes when sizing up a stranger. You are not quite as much of a telegraph as you thought you were."

The crowd yelled and whooped like lunatics over the discomfiture of the bully.

One big, burly fellow, rushed up to Frank and grasped his hand, saying:

"Put it right thar, pard! Yer're the whitest man I ever saw, an' I kin lick any galoot as says that Tom Paxton is a liar."

"You talk like a man," said Frank, shaking his hand. "This is a free country, and when a man tries to force another man to do a thing against his will he is only justifying the application of his act to his own use."

"That's so, pard," and the entire crowd grasped his hand and said he was a white man all over.

CHAPTER VII.

AN EXCITING CHASE.

FRANK did not lose sight of the man whom he had worsted. He didn't know but what the latter would draw and fire as soon as he got the chance, so he held his own weapon ready for instant use till he saw the man go down on the floor in a corner in a drunken stupor.

"That's what I call a heavy load," remarked one of the party.

"Yes," said another. "It's a bigger load than he ever carried afore, I'm betting."

"Who is he?" Frank asked.

"Don't know, stranger," replied the man addressed. "Never saw him till two days ago."

"Well, he doesn't know an old bird from a tenderfoot," remarked Frank. "He'll know one next time, I guess."

"Now yer're talkin', pard!" said a big, burly fellow, who had been locking on and listening.

Harry came walking in and the crowd looked hard at him, as if sizing him up.

"There's no telegraph office in the town, Harry," said Frank, turning to him.

"That's bad," returned Harry. "We'll have to write."

"Yes. How about the mails here? How often do they come and go?"

"Twice a week, stranger."

"Jerusalem! What do you people do here for news?"

"Drink whisky and fight," replied one of the party.

"That's amusement, not news," said Frank.

"That's news enough for us," said one of the party, dryly.

"Of course. Whatever a man is satisfied with suits him."

"It don't suit you, though, eh?" the same man asked.

"Hardly."

"Then you don't want to stop here long, mister."

"That depends upon how I like the town when I see it by daylight," retorted Frank. "This is a free country, where a man can go where he likes, and stay as long as he wishes when he behaves himself."

"Yes, that's so," assented a half dozen at once. But the other fellow didn't assent. He wanted to intimate to Frank that if he didn't like the town he had better get out of it as quick as possible.

Frank was not to be backed down by bluster. The man who was disposed to pick a quarrel with him was a friend of the one whom Frank had forced to drink the bottle of whisky.

The man, however, saw that none of the crowd were disposed to back him in a row, and so he subsided and walked away to the farther end of the saloon.

At last Frank decided to treat the crowd, and told the barkeeper to 'set 'em up.'

A whoop went up from the crowd as they rushed to the bar and called for their favorite drinks.

Nearly all of them took whisky straight. Even the man who had tried to pick a quarrel with Frank came up and called for a glass of bourbon.

"No tenderfoot about him!" sung out one of the men in the crowd when Frank paid for the drinks.

"Not much he ain't," said a dozen, in a breath. "He's white, he is."

Frank talked with the more quiet ones when he got a chance, and learned the name of the town and some of the characteristics of the people.

"Did you see a balloon day before yesterday?" he asked.

"No," was the reply. "Were there any up in this part of the State?"

"Well, we saw one a long ways off two days ago, and from the direction of the wind I thought it might have passed over this town."

"I reckon it didn't, though," said the citizen, "or the people of this town would have had a holiday and a town meeting about it."

Frank laughed, and said:

"It would have been something to talk about, eh?"

"Yes, sirree."

By and by Frank and Harry got away and strolled about among other places to see what was going on.

There was but one hotel in the place. It was frequented by the river men, and there was a fight on an average of one a night there.

They did not enter the place, but contented themselves with looking on and listening to all they could hear.

"We may as well go back to the ship, I guess," said Frank, after they had gone through the town pretty well.

"Yes, I don't see that we can learn anything more by strolling around here. We might get into a muss with some drunken fellow."

"I make it a rule never to let any drunken man take any liberties with me, Harry."

"Well, it's a good rule, but it does not work well in all cases. A little patience will sometimes work well with a man under the influence of drink."

"Yes, no doubt of that, but I have no patience for a man drunk. I don't want my best friend to come about me when he is drunk."

They wended their way back toward the ship, and when they reached the place where they struck the road after leaving Barney and Pomp, they saw the green light up instead of the red one.

"Just look at that, will you?" Frank said. "I told Barney to put up the red light."

"You can bet that something is wrong," returned Harry.

They made their way to the ship and found Barney and Pomp on guard on the deck.

"What's the matter with the red light, Barney?" Frank asked.

"Sure, an' it won't be afther burnin' at all, at all," replied Barney.

"Why not?"

"Divil a wan ave me knows."

"Isn't there any oil in it?"

"Sure, an' I don't know."

"Well, look into the cause of it in the morning. You want to have every lantern in proper trim for instant use, you know."

"Yis, sorr."

Harry and Frank retired, leaving Barney and Pomp to divide the night guard between them.

The green light was extinguished, and the ship remained wrapped in total darkness till dawn.

But when Frank and Harry awoke a little before sunrise they were astonished to find half a score of men walking around the ship, staring at it as if puzzled beyond their wits.

Pomp had cautioned them not to talk loud and awaken the master. When Frank appeared on the deck one of the men sung out to him:

"I say, mister, what kind of a craft is that?"

"It's an overland ship," was the reply.

"An overland ship?"

"Yes."

"Do yer take us for fools?"

"No."

"What er yer givin' us, then?"

"The gospel truth," was the quiet reply.

"Yer don't want ter give us that, stranger," said the spokesman of the party.

"You're a wise man. I suppose," said Frank.

"I ain't no fool to be stuffed with overland ship stories."

"How far is it to the river from here?" Frank asked.

"Half a mile."

"How did this ship get here, if it didn't come overland?"

The man looked blank for a minute or so and then said:

"I dunno. But thar ain't no overland ships, stranger, an' I've got a six-shooter as says so."

"Seeing is believing, or knowing, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir-ree."

"Well, wait an hour or two and you'll see this ship travel overland faster than anything ever traveled on water."

"If you do I'll eat my hat, stranger," said the man.

"Very well. Your friends are witnesses to that promise, understand?"

"Yes," said the others. "We'll make 'im eat it if you go overland in that thing."

Pomp soon had breakfast ready, and Frank and Harry sat down and ate a hearty meal in the cabin, whilst the spectators looked on.

The meal over, Frank proceeded to overhaul the ship and see if everything was in good working order.

An hour was spent at the task, and then Harry suddenly exclaimed:

"Great Scott, Frank, look at that balloon!"

Frank sprang up and looked in the direction of the river.

A few hundred yards up a great balloon was ascending from a point beyond the river, and floating southeastward.

The dozen spectators near the flying ship turned and gazed at the balloon in dumfounded amazement.

They made a rush for the road, very much excited, and stopped there, eagerly discussing the question as to how a balloon ascension so near the town could take place without their knowledge.

"That's our balloon, Harry," said Frank, after gazing at it in silence for a minute or two.

"Yes, I guess it is."

"Well we'll go for it! All aboard!"

The men down in the road heard him, and turned to see what he meant.

When they heard the whir of the machinery, and saw the revolving wings turn, their astonishment was boundless.

But when the ship arose from the ground, and passed directly over their heads, they were almost paralyzed.

"Make him eat that hat," sung out Frank to the party below, and in another minute they had passed beyond hailing distance.

Once well up in the air, Frank seized his spy-glass and leveled it at the balloon.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed. "I know one of those fellows."

"The dence you do!" said Harry.

"Yes—look and see if you can't recognize one of them," and he handed the glass to Harry, who took it and leveled it at the balloon.

He was silent for a couple of minutes, and then remarked:

"One of them looks like that chap you forced to empty that bottle last night."

"Yes, he's the very fellow. That's Bill Moss, as he called himself. They are the balloon crowd, and they must have gone down in the night time, so the people didn't know anything about them."

"Yes, and they may have committed robberies in the village last night. By George! they have turned a glass on us! They seem to be worried, and are rising higher every moment."

"We can rise as high as they can," said Frank. "Let 'em go as high as they please!"

The balloon men threw out ballast, and the great balloon rose rapidly, going up in great bounds.

But the ship rose with it, and in a very few minutes both were more than a mile above the earth.

Yet they continued to ascend, and in a little while fully two miles lay between them and the earth.

Harry began to grow uneasy and remarked:

"I hope they won't go any higher. It's getting dangerous."

"Two miles is a great height," said Frank. "But the danger is no greater than 200 yards. As well fall two or three miles as two or three hundred yards."

"Yes, I suppose so, but still I'd feel better if we were not so high."

"It makes no difference with me. I am going to go as high as they do, unless that balloon runs away with them."

"I guess it's doing that now," said Harry.

Nearly another mile was added to the height, and still the balloon ascended.

"I wonder how much higher they are going?" Frank asked, as he gazed up at the balloon, which was at least the eighth of a mile above the ship.

"I believe it's running away with them," said Harry.

"Dat's er fac," said Pomp, who was growing very uneasy.

"Bedad, an' it's meself as thinks that same, sorr," put in Barney.

"Why can't we go as high as they can?" Frank asked.

"Bedad, we can do that same, sorr, but we be not the same fools I'm thinkin'."

Harry laughed and said:

"That's just it. There's no use in making fools of ourselves just because they do."

Just then Frank noticed that the machinery did not work as well as usual. It seemed that the rarefied air at that great height had some deterring effect on the electric batteries.

"Hold on to this wheel, Harry," he said to his companion, "whilst I go below and see what the trouble is."

Harry did as requested, and Frank went below to make an inspection of the batteries.

When he came back to the pilot-house he saw that the balloon was at least a half mile above the ship.

"They are getting away from us, Harry," he remarked. "I don't understand it. We ought to go as high as they do, though they work on a different principle."

"Ain't we sinking?" Harry asked.

"I don't know whether we are or not. The balloon may be going up faster. We'll know in a little while."

Half an hour passed and the balloon was still farther away and the earth was nearer.

Frank's face was a picture to look at as he made the discovery.

Harry was watching him very closely, and was trembling in his shoes for fear of an accident.

Suddenly he asked:

"Are we in any danger?"

"None that I can see," was the reply. "But I do fear that this thing is a failure."

"A failure!"

"Yes, a miserable failure."

Harry was astonished.

"I don't see why you should think so."

"That's because you don't understand it. We can't go up there after that balloon—hence the failure."

"But we can keep along between them and the earth, and they can't stay up there always, you know."

Frank looked at him and his face brightened.

"That's true—we may catch them yet if they don't get away from us under the cover of darkness. There's our greatest danger."

"Maybe we can keep near enough to them to keep 'em in sight."

"Yes, if we can keep 'em between us and the stars. But if rain clouds come up and obscure the stars we will lose sight of them."

"But the same wind that blows them along will blow us at the same rate, will it not?"

"Not always. Something may happen which you know nothing about. Sometimes near the surface of the earth a wind may blow westward, whilst at the altitude of a mile it may be going the other way."

"Ah! I didn't know that."

"So you see the difficulty we are laboring under. But we'll give 'em a deal of trouble. They can't see us while we are below them in the night, though we can see them. They may undertake to drop down quietly somewhere, and if they do we can make a break for them. They are posted, and know that we are after them."

"Undoubtedly."

Hours passed, and the ship was still sailing smoothly along about a half mile above the earth. The balloon was at least two miles high.

The wind was very light, and so both drifted very slowly with it.

When night came on Frank got out his spy glass and took another look at the balloon.

"I am going to mount higher as soon as it gets dark enough for me to do so without being seen," he said to Harry.

"Yes, that would enable us to keep 'em in sight."

"Of course."

The sun went down, and the stars came out.

The ship went up a mile higher, and Harry was thus enabled to see the balloon which was almost perpendicular above him.

"Put out the lights when you are through with the dishes, Pomp," ordered Frank.

"Yes, sah."

Hours passed and the balloon was still above them.

Then the wind changed and both floated toward the southwest.

All night long the pursuit was kept up, and when the stars began to

fade away the balloon was still floating high up above the flying-ship.

"They are still flying high," said Harry.

"Yes, so they are; but they'll have to come down after awhile. They can't stay up there always. I'll bet they want water now. If another storm doesn't interfere we'll have them in less than three days."

"Suppose they resist?"

"What good will it do?"

Harry didn't know.

Pomp prepared an excellent breakfast, and when it had been disposed of the ship was sent up higher toward the balloon.

"What's the use in getting any nearer to them?" Harry asked.

"I won't to worry them as much as I can," replied Frank.

"I guess they are worried a good deal already," remarked Harry, shaking his head.

"Maybe they are. If they are not it is not my fault. They are going up higher again. I don't think they can stay up twenty-four hours longer."

The day was a warm one and light, fleecy clouds floated lazily about.

Frank dropped down a mile, and kept nearer the earth.

"Great Scott!" gasped Harry. "The balloon is lost in a cloud bank!"

"That is nothing. It is nothing but a mist when you get into it."

"There they are again!"

Barney and Pomp were interested spectators of the scene, and had many comments to make.

But the capture of the balloon seemed as far off as ever.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FIGHT IN THE AIR.

DURING the day the wind increased, and the two floated along toward the southwest at the rate of twenty miles an hour. Yet to those in the balloon or ship they seemed to be hanging still in mid-air.

"I see a couple of deer down there, Frank," said Harry, who had been looking downward with the glass.

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Get your gun, then, and we'll have some venison."

Harry got out his gun and Frank began to lower the ship.

When within two hundred feet of the earth Harry fired, and one of the deer fell, mortally wounded.

The ship rested on the prairie, and Pomp leapt out and cut off the haunches in a trice.

Barney took them on board.

"All aboard!" shouted Frank, and Pomp came aboard with the celerity of a squirrel.

Up again the ship went, and the chase continued through the air.

Pomp prepared the venison for dinner, and they all four relished it with the zest of old hunters.

"They can't carry much food and drink with them in the car of that balloon," said Frank, looking up at the fugitives. "They can't hold out much longer. They may try to give us the dodge to-night."

"Then we'll have to look sharp for them."

"Yes, very sharp. They have one man along who knows how to handle a balloon. But starvation will force them to come down after awhile."

All day long the pursuit continued, and late in the afternoon they were passing over a wide expanse of prairie land.

"It begins to look as if we were bound for Mexico," remarked Harry.

"Yes, and we'll get there, too, if the wind lies in that direction two or three days and we keep on going. I guess we can go as far as they do if we don't fly as high."

"Of course. I'd like to see them come down at mid-day."

"They won't do that if they can help it. But we may look for them to do that to-night, or at least, try it."

The sun went down, the stars came out, and the balloon still floated high up above everything.

"Now we'll slip up a mile or so nearer to them, and keep them in sight," said Frank. "They'll try to give us the dodge to-night, I am

sure. If they do we'll run into them and perforate the balloon with bullets."

The ship gradually ascended till they were up at a very high altitude again. Under the clear starlight the balloon could be seen.

But toward the earth everything looked as black as Egypt.

True to expectation the balloon began to descend.

"They're coming down," said Harry.

"Yes. We'll go down, too, so as to have them as near the earth as possible when we call on them to surrender."

They both descended to within half a mile of the earth, when those in the car of the balloon evidently heard the machinery in the ship, for the balloon mounted up again as fast as they could throw out ballast.

"By George!" whispered Harry. "They are going up again as fast as they can."

"So they are; hanged if I don't go up, too," and the ship made an upward start that soon brought the balloon in hailing distance.

"Hello there!" cried Frank in loud tones.

"Hello, yourself!" came back in response.

"Why don't you wait for company?"

"Don't want any company," was the reply.

"But we want to see you on business."

"This ain't a business party. We are a pleasure party."

"Where are you bound?"

"Wherever the wind blows."

"Well, I guess we'll go that way, too," said Frank. "As long as we are going in the same direction we might as well go together."

"Well, if you want to go with us why don't you come up?"

"Oh, we are not such high flyers as you are. Come down and have a drink with us."

"We don't drink. We are teetotalers."

"That's a bad sign," and Frank laughed as he thought of the quantity of liquor he had forced one of the party to drink two nights previous.

The balloon ascended higher and higher, and the ship had to do some climbing, too, in order to keep it in sight.

Thus the night passed, and morning found them about a half mile apart.

"I wish I had a speaking trumpet," said Harry, as he looked up at the balloon.

"What good would it do you if they didn't have one too?"

"Well, I wish they had one too," and Harry laughed as he made the wish.

"I am going down nearer the earth. We may see a chance to get some fresh water somewhere."

Accordingly he lowered the ship till it was only about a thousand feet above the earth.

Two hours later they saw a small stream of clear water, and made a landing close beside it.

Whilst Pomp and Barney were filling the cans with water, Harry and Frank took their guns and shot several brace of prairie hens, all of which could be seen from the balloon by means of the spy glass they had.

"All aboard!" cried Frank, after a delay of a half hour or so.

Barney and Pomp sprang aboard, and the ship rose at once.

Two hours fast traveling again brought them to a point almost under the balloon.

But in the afternoon a dark cloud came up in the south-east, and the wind set in from that direction soon after. The course of the balloon was changed to a north-westerly direction, and the ship followed suit.

"This will take us to Salt Lake City if it keeps steady in that direction," said Frank.

"I'd rather go there than to Mexico," replied Harry.

"So had I, though the Mormons don't love the American people any more than the Mexicans do. But we'll go wherever they go, unless it's out to sea."

"I don't believe they would go out to sea themselves?"

"They would go anywhere to get away from us. They know that this ship aims to transport them to State's prison, the one place in the wide, wide world they don't want to go to."

"Hanged if they ain't coming down!" cried Harry, looking over his shoulder at the balloon.

"Yes, so they are! Something is the matter!"

The balloon began to descend as if the party was making a deliberate go in that direction, much to the surprise of Frank and Harry.

"Let 'em get below us before you start for 'em, Frank," suggested Harry.

"Yes. I was thinking of that," said Frank. "I want to see if they mean to land. If they do we'll go down and give 'em a square fight."

"It would be man to man—four against four," said Harry.

"Yes; but we have the best weapons and the best men."

"Of course."

The men in the car of the balloon seemed to be very much excited over something, and one of them was seen to be tugging at a rope as they descended.

Suddenly the downward course of the balloon seemed to be arrested, for it appeared to be on the rise again.

"Now is our chance," said Frank. "We'll demand a surrender. Get your guns."

Harry, Barney and Pomp got their rifles.

Barney brought one into the pilot-house for Frank.

The ship descended till it was nearly on a level with the balloon.

"Go down to the ground," said Frank, "or we'll make bullet holes in your balloon."

"You can't make any holes in it," said the spokesman, who proved to be the Bill Moss whom Frank had met in the town they last stopped at.

"Don't flatter yourself that we can't, for we can. We have Winchester rifles."

"Bullets won't go through silk unless there is something behind it to resist it."

"When we find that we can't make holes in your balloon, we'll try our hands at making holes in you. We have come for you, and you may just as well come down at one time as another."

"That's a game that two can play at," said another one of the party. "We have rifles, too," and each of the four men raised a rifle to show that he had one.

"You won't surrender, then?" Frank demanded.

"No, we won't."

"Come back into the pilot-house," said Frank, to his party. "They can't hit us there."

Harry, Barney and Pomp came back into the pilot-house, and then Frank ordered them to fire at the balloon.

They did so, but if it had any effect on the huge silk surface, they could not see it.

The balloon continued to rise higher and higher.

"The distance is too great," said Frank. "If we get in close range the bullets will go through the silk. It must be strong silk. The soft pressure of the gas inside causes the silk to give way till the force of the bullet is spent. I never thought of that. Look out! They are going to fire!"

The men in the car fired at the pilot-house of the flying-ship.

Two struck it and went through the wood-work. Another bullet struck the deck.

"Give 'em a volley to kill," said Frank.

Barney rose up and aimed at the basket-car under the balloon and fired.

One of the men dropped his rifle overboard and sank down in the car.

"By George, but he downed one of them!" exclaimed Harry.

"This is horrible!"

"How horrible!"

"The taking of human life."

"They are criminals whom it's right and proper to shoot down when they resist arrest."

"That may be all true, but I don't want to do it all the same."

"Nor do I. But they have begun it and I am now going to give them their fill of it," and he snatched up a rifle and was about to aim at the car, when one of the men in it lost his balance and fell overboard.

"My God!" gasped Harry. "Just look at that!"

Both were over a half mile in the air now, and the man who tumbled went whirling over and over in his downward course, one long, wild, piercing scream escaping him.

A moment or two later he struck the earth.

But the distance was too great for those above to hear it.

A shudder of horror passed through them as they gazed downward at the terrible sight.

Just as Frank was going to hail the balloon again, the man who had been shot was thrown overboard by the two survivors, and again those on board the ship gazed downward to see the body strike the earth.

This lightened the balloon to such an extent that it went bounding upwards so rapidly, that ere Frank was aware of it it was completely out of range of his rifle.

"They have gotten away from us again," he said, as he looked up at the balloon. "But we will hang on to the last."

"Two are done for, though."

"Yes, and that much good work is done."

"I wonder what they are living on!"

"They must have had some supplies with them; but they can't carry much in that basket you know."

"No, of course not. We have done good work, though. If we can keep 'em on the go we can starve them into surrender."

"I am not sure of that. They will go down in the night if they can, leap out and leave us the empty balloon to hold. At least, that is what I would do rather than be taken."

"But you needn't tell them that."

"Oh, no. I want to capture them with the balloon."

"Yes. That would be a big card for you."

"Of course."

The balloon soared to an immense height—higher than ever—and as he gazed up at it, Frank said:

"That's higher than I care to go, and nearer heaven than they'll ever get again."

"Very likely. How high do you think they are above the earth?"

"Fully three miles," was the reply.

"By George! That's high up!"

"Dat's er fac," said Pomp, gazing up at the floating object.

In a little while the breeze died out altogether, and both seemed to hang in mid-air without making any progress at all.

The day waned, and Pomp prepared an early supper, that all hands might have leisure time to watch the balloon when the stars came out.

The evening star seemed to be larger and more brilliant than ever that evening, and Harry remarked:

"We seem to be as high as that star."

"Yes, so we do, but we are not all the same," said Frank.

"Oh, I know that well enough."

"We want to get as high as that balloon and no higher."

As soon as it was dark enough to prevent it being seen by those in the balloon, Frank sent the ship up nearly two miles, so that they could keep an eye on the balloon.

Thus he managed to keep it in sight till he discovered, about midnight, that it was making a rapid descent.

He sank down, too, till they were within 2,000 feet of the earth, as near as he could judge.

"Now is our time. Stand ready with your guns!" ordered Frank.

Barney and Pomp were on the forward deck in front of the pilot-house. Harry went inside, and stood near the wheel with Frank.

The ship went right at the balloon, and in two or three minutes would have run into it had not a species of whirlwind interfered in a most remarkable manner.

The balloon suddenly began to whirl round and round, and rise rapidly, leaving the ship to pass under it.

The whirlwind gave the great wings a twist that managed to throw her on her side.

"Oh, de Lor' sabe us!" groaned Pomp, dropping his rifle and grabbing a ringbolt.

His gun went overboard and was lost, whilst he barely saved himself.

Barney caught a rope with one hand and held on to his gun.

Inside the pilot-house Harry demonstrated that if he had been outside on the deck, he would have gone overboard. As it was, he came very near going through the sides of the pilot-house, so hard did he strike it when the ship lurched.

Fortunately the lurch threw her out of the current and she floated away some distance ere Frank got control of her again.

"That was a narrow escape," Frank said.

"What in thunder was it?" Harry asked.

"A little eddying whirlwind," was the reply.

"Be the powers," exclaimed Barney, coming to the door of the pilot house. "It's bad luck we're afther havin', Mister Frank."

"Dat's er fac, sah," said Pomp. "Dat dar gun is done gone an' fell overboard, Marse Frank."

"What, your gun!"

"Yes, sah. Dis nigger was ergwine wid it, too, when I grabbed dat ring bolt."

"Well, you were lucky," said Frank.

"Bad cess till it," said Barney, looking around after the balloon.

It could not be seen.

Frank came out of the pilot-house and swept the heavens with his spy-glass, and failed to catch any glimpse of the balloon.

He could see no object passing between the earth and the stars.

"That whirlwind must have twisted them out of sight some way," he said. "The best thing we can do is just to float with the wind. It may keep us in sight of each other."

"Yes, but doesn't it seem strange that those fellows should have twice escaped us in a way that human agency had nothing to do in bringing about?"

"Yes, indeed," returned Frank. "I was thinking of that when you mentioned it."

An hour passed, and still no signs of the balloon was seen.

Frank never wished for daylight more earnestly in his life.

Blucher at Waterloo was not wished for by Wellington more than Frank wished to see the stars fade away before the advancing dawn.

The hours seemed like days to him, and when he saw the gray tints of coming day in the East he almost shouted for very joy.

Eagerly he looked in every direction for the balloon.

But it was not yet light enough. The stars still shone in their spheres.

But they faded away at last, and then it was that a little object floating away to the southward was seen. It did not appear to be larger than a man's hat.

The spy-glass made it out to be the balloon they were after.

"It's our game," said Frank. "We'll try it again and maybe we'll succeed next time."

"They seem bound for Mexico this time," remarked Harry, laughing.

"Yes. They would go anywhere to shake us off, I guess."

"They gave us the grand shake last night without any trouble, it seems."

"So they did, and strange 't was, too, that the whirlwind should strike us just as we were about to come together. But do you know I am glad the thing occurred as it did?"

"Dence you are!"

"Yes. It demonstrated to me that this flying-ship, though considered by you as a wonderful invention, is really very crude and defective. I am finding out her defects every day, and am studying how to remedy them all the time."

"This is only an experiment, then?"

"That's all."

"I didn't know that I am as big a fool as I am," remarked Harry.

"How so?"

"Why, none but fools would attempt what we have done as a mere experiment."

Frank laughed heartily.

"As well fall three miles as three hundred feet," he said. "The end would be the same."

"Yes, I suppose it would."

The balloon soon grew larger as the ship drew nearer to it.

It also became apparent that the balloonists were trying to get away from their pursuers as fast as they could.

But they had no means of propulsion other than the wind, and that was as kind to their foe as to themselves.

They were up high above the point to which the ship could reach, however, and in that they evidently relied for a means of escape.

On sped the ship in the pursuit, and in three or four hours they were again within a mile of the balloon, which was almost perpendicular above them.

"Well, we are under them again," said Frank, "and I'll wager that they are not as much pleased therat as we are."

"You'd win that bet easy enough, I guess," returned Harry.

"I think so; but I don't want to meet any more midnight whirlwinds."

CHAPTER IX.

THE BALLOON CAPTURED.

DURING the afternoon the balloon came down low enough for parley.

"Say, you!" called out the man Moss from the balloon.

"Well, what is it?" Frank responded at the top of his voice.

"What do you fellows want?"

"We want you and your balloon."

"What for?"

"To deliver both to the sheriff of Cranston, in Illinois."

"What does he want us for?"

"Robbery."

"You don't want us then, for we are not robbers."

"Perhaps; but why not come down and prove it?"

"We prefer to stay up here."

"No doubt of it. I am going to hang on to you till I get you."

"You'll hang a mighty long time then."

"Maybe so," and then a pause of some minutes ensued.

Finally Moss sung out again:

"What do you want to let up on this thing?"

"Nothing but you and your balloon."

"What reward do you expect to get?"

"The satisfaction of seeing you behind prison bars," was the prompt reply.

"Oh, there's no money in that for you."

"I am satisfied all the same, though."

"I'll give you a good stake to go away?"

"Not much you won't. I am going to take you back to Cranston dead or alive."

"I say, Frank," said Harry, "don't you notice that cloud on there?" and he pointed to a black cloud in the southeast which was expanding in a way that looked dangerous.

"I've had my eye on it for ten minutes past," was the reply. "It means mischief, I'm afraid."

"You had better look out for it then."

"Yes; I am doing that."

By and by Moss sung out again:

"What do you say to taking the balloon and letting us go? That will break us up, you know."

"Can't do it. I'd rather take you and let the balloon go."

"That you'll never do. We'll fight to the bitter end."

"Oh, that's all right. We are in for the bitter end too."

The balloon ascended higher.

Moss saw the cloud in the southeast, and conceived the novel idea of trying to ride above it, hoping that it would strike the ship and either destroy it or else drive it to earth.

The cloud increased in size, and became more threatening every moment.

"Frank, be prudent and go down," said Harry, as he listened to repeated rolls of thunder in that direction.

"I don't see that we have anything but a shower to look for there," remarked Frank.

"There may be a fierce wind in it for aught you know," replied Harry.

"Dat's er fac," put in Pomp, who didn't want to tackle any more whirlwinds in mid-air.

Just then he felt a fresh breeze from the cloud, and noticed that the great wings were affected by it in a measure. He gazed at the cloud in silence for a moment or two, and then decided to go down.

The ship was directly over a river at the time. It was necessary to sail beyond the south bank in order to get at the open prairie.

In passing over the timber they heard howls and yells that might have come up from the bottomless pit.

"Great Scott!" gasped Harry. "What is that!"

Barney and Pomp proceeded to make inspection at once.

"Dem Injuns, Barney!" said Pomp, even before he caught sight of the encampment in the timber.

The sounds were familiar to him, as they were also to Barney.

"Bedad, an' it's roight ye are, Pomp. The red naygurs are afther thinkin' it's the ould Nick we are."

"Dat's er fac," assented Pomp as he discovered a band of Indians below, who were frightened almost out of their wits at the flying ship.

They were whooping, yelling and howling like so many lunatics, as they gazed up at the ship.

"Are they in war paint?" Frank asked from the pilot house.

"No, sah, dey ain't," replied Pomp.

"Then they won't trouble us any," and he proceeded to let the ship settle down in the open prairie about a quarter of a mile from the Indian camp.

They had not been down two minutes ere the storm broke upon them with tremendous fury.

The wind blew fierce and strong, and the rain came down in blinding torrents.

Thunder pealed forth and shook the very earth, whilst keen, sharp flashes of lightning splintered two trees in the edge of the timber.

It was a terrific display of the mighty forces of nature, and then it passed away in a steady down-pour of rain.

Frank lost sight of the balloon ere he made the landing. The black cloud seemed to have shut out all view of it long before the storm burst.

"This fierce wind will blow them fifty miles an hour," remarked Harry.

"Very likely."

"They'll make a landing somewhere, then, and hide the balloon till we go home in disgust."

"Maybe so and perhaps not," returned Frank. "We have not started home in disgust yet."

"No, not yet, but I am of the opinion that we will soon."

"That's because you don't know Frank Reade as well as I do," observed Frank.

Harry laughed and said:

"Well, I may be wrong, but it looks that way to me now."

"I don't doubt it. But let's wait till this storm is over, and maybe you will change your opinion."

"The Indians may change theirs, too, and pay us a visit."

Frank laughed and said:

"You don't know much about the redskins. They wouldn't come about us for two or three days, and not then unless somebody explained this thing to them. They believe in the supernatural strongly, and anything they cannot comprehend appears supernatural to them."

His words proved true.

The rain ceased, and the clouds began to break away.

The Indians came out to the edge of the timber and gazed at the flying-ship in awe-struck silence.

No power on earth could have persuaded them to go any nearer to it.

They would not take any liberties with anything supernatural.

"Dar's dat balloon!" cried Pomp, pointing upward at an angle of about forty-five degrees.

Frank and Harry glanced up and were amazed to find that the balloon was almost in the same position as before the storm.

"How do you account for it, Frank?" Harry asked.

"Very easily. They were above the storm and didn't feel any of the effects of it at all."

"That's strange."

"Not at all. I've read of balloons being up above the clouds, whilst between them and the earth a great storm of wind, rain, thunder and lightning raged. This is a case of that kind, and the fact that the balloon is there is a proof of it."

"Of course," and Harry looked up at the balloon again as if half doubting the evidence of his own sight.

Frank hurriedly went through the ship and examined every bolt and screw to make sure that none were out of order.

Finding everything in order, he went into the pilot-house and prepared to start up again.

"Why not wait and see if the balloon is going off anywhere?" suggested Harry.

"Yes, that's a good idea. I will wait. We can easily overtake her."

They waited an hour or two longer, during which time the balloon slowly floated eastward.

"Why, that's strange," said Harry. "The wind is blowing from the southeast. Just look at that!" and he blew a cloud of cigar smoke from his mouth.

"The balloon is nearly three miles up and in a counter-current," Frank explained.

"Well, I'd like to see that counter-current blow them back to the States."

"Maybe it will," said Frank, watching the course of the balloon.

"All aboard!" he suddenly shouted, and the next moment he set the machinery in motion that sent the ship upward like a lark rising to greet the morning sun.

Up, up it went, and the balloon was soon brought nearer to them. As Frank was gazing at them through the glass he noticed that Moss was looking badly.

"Harry, I'm blest if those two ain't starving!"

"Surely they don't mean to starve rather than surrender!" said Harry.

"Just look for yourself and see," and he handed him the glass.

After looking for a minute or two he remarked:

"It does look that way."

"Yes."

"Will they hold out?"

"I don't know."

"The breeze up there is freshening."

"Yes, they are going east."

"So they are."

"Sometimes the west winds last several days."

"Hope this one will."

"So do I."

The balloon traveled fast all day long, and the ship followed a mile lower, keeping pace with it.

When night came on a dead calm settled down upon them and both floated within sight of each other till morning.

Then came another whirlwind which struck the balloon and gave it some rough twisting.

At one time it was jerked around so vigorously that everything in the car was thrown out. The two men saved themselves by being lashed to the ropes.

Three rifles and some blankets went down, and were seen no more, for they fell in a lake or lagoon over which they were passing at the time.

"That disarms them," said Frank, with some degree of relief, "and I am glad of it. Some men, driven to desperation, may be very dangerous."

"Yes. They may have their revolvers, though."

"Yes, but our rifles will give us the advantage."

"So they will."

Frank moved away from the path of the whirlwind, and thus managed to escape it.

Then, when it was smooth sailing again, he rose up to within range of the balloon again and called out:

"How much longer are you going to keep this up?"

"As long as we can," was the reply.

"That's good game," remarked Harry.

"Yes, but very foolish."

"Of course."

"There would be some sense in that course if you had any hope of succeeding in the end," returned Frank.

"We have a good deal of hope—more than you have, I reckon," came back from Moss.

"You know better. You are starving for want of food and water now."

"Not much we ain't."

"But I know better."

"You are a wise man, ain't you?"

"Yes."

"Glad to hear it. When I want to know anything I'll send for you."

Harry laughed and nudged Frank, saying:

"He's game and sassy."

"Yes. Hanged if I don't see if we can reach them," and he sent the ship bounding upward till they were not more than one hundred yards apart.

"Now fire at the balloon, Pomp," he ordered.

Pomp blazed away with a rifle, but it could not be seen that the bullets had any effect on the tripled silk.

"Nearer still," and he was within seventy-five yards.

Pomp fired again, and the sound of escaping gas was heard.

"Whoop!" yelled Barney. "That settles the spalpeens!"

"That got 'em!" cried Harry.

"Don't shoot any more, Pomp," said Frank. "That will compel them to go down slowly."

Moss and his companion sprang up and began emptying their revolvers at the ship.

But the distance was too great for any damage to be done.

A spent ball struck Barney and stung him a little, but did no further harm.

Another struck a window of the pilot-house and broke the glass.

"Blaze away," laughed Frank. "Blaze away as much as you like, but you'll come down all the same. You can't stop that small hole. The leak will bring you down in spite of all you can do."

By and by the balloon began to descend, and Barney and Pomp began to yell.

Slowly but steadily it drifted toward the earth, and then when at a distance of a half mile or so, it seemed to come to a standstill.

"I am going to charge on it," said Frank. "The jib will strike her square in the center. Stand ready to pull 'em on board if they want to save themselves."

She ship made a straight run toward the balloon, and as Frank predicted, the jib struck the center of the balloon and smashed it in.

That caused the car to swing back and forth so violently that both men were thrown out of it.

But Barney had thrown a rope to one who caught it. Pomp had picked up a long pole with a hook to it, and extended the end of it to the other.

Both grasped tightly the succor thrown them, and were with great difficulty drawn on board the ship.

They were weak from starvation.

"Water! Water! Gimme water!" they both exclaimed as soon as they reached the deck.

Harry led the way into the cabin and gave them each a pint of water and some food.

They ate like ravenous wolves, and would have killed themselves had they been allowed food enough.

Frank came in with Barney and Pomp, and Moss looked hard at him, saying:

"I wish I had known who you were when I first saw you."

"You mean on the occasion of your drinking a bottle of whisky at my expense?"

"Yes."

"What would you have done?"

"Never mind. Things would have ended differently from this."

"Well, to make sure that my plans are not interfered with you two must be bound."

"Oh, there's no use in that. We won't make any trouble."

"We won't take any chances on that," and so Barney and Pomp tied them up hard and fast, and then went out to see to capturing the balloon which, now that it was relieved of the weight of the two men, began to rise again.

"Just give her time and she'll come down," said Harry.

"Of course, but I'm afraid she won't till night and then give me the slip. I want to make sure of her."

"It won't do to fasten to her?"

"No. We might get jerked about and run a great risk."

"Then let her float as long as she floats in our direction."

CHAPTER X.

CONCLUSION.

THE balloon did not rise more than the fourth of a mile after being relieved of its passengers. Then it began slowly to descend, and the ship prepared to take entire charge of it as it came down.

As it neared the earth it traveled faster.

A strong wind was blowing and the ship had all it could do to go along with it.

At one time it looked as though the ship would have to settle down and wait till the blow was over.

But they managed to keep along pretty well with it till it struck against the top of an old dead cottonwood tree, which had been killed by a stroke of lightning.

The rigging caught in that tree-top, and a terrible crash was the result.

Part of the tree snapped, but the balloon was torn so badly that the gas escaped, and the great expanse of silk hung limp to the old dead cottonwood.

"Well, here's a go!" exclaimed Harry.

"Yes, and a bad one," added Frank. "We'll have to land and cut down that tree."

"Jerusalem! It's as large at the base as a hogshead."

"We'll have to cut it down all the same, for I must have that balloon to show in court at the trial of those two fellows."

"Yes, it would be necessary, I suppose."

"It might not be necessary to convict them, but it is necessary for me. I don't want to half way do the job."

"I understand. Cut down the tree and get every inch of the canvas."

"Just what I am going to do. But I am at a loss to know what I am going to do with it then. We can't carry such a load as that will be and six men besides."

"Ah! I never thought of that."

They landed within two hundred yards of the balloon, and then proceeded to devise some way to secure the balloon from any further damage.

After an hour's time they decided to cut the tree down and take the chances on damaging the silk any more than had already been done.

Barney and Pomp brought two axes from the ship, and went to work.

It was an immense trunk, fully four feet in diameter, hence it took them hours to bring it down.

When it fell, it shook the earth, and damaged the balloon badly. But they went to work to get as much of it out of the wreck as they possibly could.

Night came on, and put a stop to their work, and they returned to the ship to rest, eat supper, and get a good night's sleep.

The two prisoners had been given food at intervals of two hours, and were now sleeping better than at any time since they discovered they were being pursued.

Early the next morning they went at the task of securing the balloon, and by noon had gotten all the silk and ropes out of the wreck.

The car was smashed so completely that they did not attempt to do anything with it.

"Now what shall we do with it?" said Frank. "We can't carry such a load with six men."

"Leave Barney and I here with it," said Harry, "and we'll camp by this river till you return for us."

Frank grasped his hand and said:

"Thank you, Harry. You have good judgment and plenty of pluck. I'd like to have you go round the world with me some time."

"I'd like nothing better," said Harry, returning the cordial hand grasp.

"I'll take the prisoners to the nearest town, leave them there, and then return for you."

Leaving weapons and plenty of ammunition with them, Frank and Pomp took the ship and the two prisoners and set out for the East.

They pushed straight ahead as fast as they could, and when night came didn't stop for anything.

All night long they sailed, and on the next morning came in sight of a border town.

"There's our resting place," said Frank, and he at once proceeded to descend right in the heart of the town.

Of course the people were dumfounded at seeing such a thing come down in their midst.

Merchants and customers alike ran out into the streets to see and hear.

Frank soon explained the whole business to them, and they agreed to take care of the two prisoners till he could return for Harry and Barney.

Of course he lost no time in returning.

But he spent a day in trying to find them after he had reached the river.

It took them some time to get the silk and other parts of the balloon stowed away on the deck of the ship, and when that was done night had come on again, and they decided to remain there and take an early start in the morning.

But the next day was a cold, raw, rainy day, and Frank decided that he would not travel that day on account of contrary winds blowing.

During the day Barney shot and killed a fine buck which he saw stalking through the timber near where the ship was settled.

"This has been an exciting chase all the way through, Harry," said Frank, as Barney brought the two haunches of venison on board.

"Yes, indeed. Those two men falling from the balloon was the most exciting thing I ever saw in all my life."

"Yes, I suppose it was. I shall never forget that fellow's yell when he lost his balance and found himself going overboard."

"Nor I either."

"And then when the whirlwind took the balloon away from us, and came near getting Barney and Pomp overboard."

"Yes. I'll be a very old man when I forget that."

"So will I."

"Well, we've got 'em after all our trouble, and it's a big feather in your cap, Frank."

"Yes, and that's where the satisfaction comes in."

"I suppose so."

The next day was clear and cool, and our heroes decided to start at sunrise.

Accordingly, just as the sun rose from out of the plains the ship ascended to the distance of half a mile, and sailed away toward the east.

All day long they sailed and when night came on they pushed on with all the speed they could command, and early the next morning came in sight of the town where the two prisoners had been left in charge of the citizens.

When the ship was sighted the entire population turned out to welcome it.

They crowded around it to look at Harry, Barney and the huge balloon of which they had heard so much.

"How are my two prisoners?" Frank asked of a citizen whom he recognized as having been one of the volunteer guard.

"Wal, I dunno," was the reply. "Ain't seed 'em for two days or more."

"They are here yet?"

"Wal, no, stranger. Fact is we hung 'em."

"The deuce!"

"Yes. They was hoss thieves. It's the rule to hang hoss thieves you know, and then the citizen told about how, when the guards got drunk the two prisoners made their escape, stole two horses and rode like the wind. Others pursued, caught and brought them back. The indignant decided that it was a case of horse stealing, and that it was their duty to hang them according to the custom of the country. So they were hanged."

"We've marked their graves so you kin see 'em, pard," said the man. "They ar thar, for I help plant 'em."

Frank looked at Harry and laughed.

He couldn't help it.

"I suppose we may consider ourselves lucky if we can show any of the balloon at Cranston."

"Yes, indeed," assented Harry, "and to have a chance to do so we'd better go up again and skip."

But the well meaning people of the place would not let them get away so easily.

They had to stay and accept the hospitalities of the town. They were feasted and toasted as the greatest inventors of any age.

Even Pomp was treated with distinguished consideration because he had sailed through the air in a flying-ship.

But after two days they were allowed to depart.

This time they took the balloon with them, and they were lucky enough to get it intact, for every man in the town was waiting to get a chance to cut out a piece of it to keep as a memento of a wonderful invention and the hanging of two men.

"Now you want to make for home as fast as you can," said Harry.

"I know my parents are very much worried over my absence. You see it has been two weeks since I have been able to write to them."

"Yes. We'll telegraph to them when we strike a telegraph office anywhere."

The day passed without their striking any telegraph office. Several small settlements were passed, at none of which did they stop.

But just as night was coming on they heard the whistle of a steam engine. The spy glass enabled them to find it.

It was on a railroad, and by following the line of it found quite a lively little town.

"We'll find a telegraph office there, I'll wager," said Harry.

"Yes, and a pretty girl operator, too," remarked Frank, laughing.

They settled down in one of the public streets of the place, and caused the greatest sensation the town had ever seen.

Men, women and children, flocked around the ship in the twilight of the evening, and Frank had to make a speech, explaining the expedition he was returning from.

Then every man wanted to shake his hand and call him pard.

But he told them he wanted to send dispatches East, and a great crowd escorted him and Harry to the telegraph office, where he sent a message to Readestown, and Harry one to Cranston.

Then they were invited to an impromptu ball at the tavern that night. It was gotten up in their honor, and they had to go to get acquainted with and dance till after midnight.

By that time they were both pretty well tired out, and managed to get away in time to get a few hours' sleep on board the ship.

Early the next morning the crowd began to collect again, and he saw that in a few minutes they would be all over the ship without leave, so he ordered all aboard, and sent it up, followed by the shouts and protests of the crowd.

But they were glad enough to get away.

The people were too demonstrative in their hospitality, and took too many liberties with the ship, and to forbid them was to insult them. To insult one was to invite a bullet.

They were very sociable indeed.

"We don't want to stop at any more border towns," said Harry, when well under way again.

"No. They mean well, though."

"No doubt of that. But I don't want any more of their well meaning hospitality."

"Nor do I. I think we can go through now without any more stops unless the wind gets too strong for us."

They pushed on toward the east, and during the day passed a number of good-sized villages.

In some of them the people saw them and turned out into the streets to gaze up at them.

"This is something new all round, Frank," said Harry.

"Yes. The people in New York would turn out to stare at us. We are ahead, you see."

"Yes. I'd like to see you make a fortune off of this thing."

"I am going to make improvements on this. This one is almost a dead failure. When I make another you will see something that will make your head swim."

"Let me know by mail when you do, and I'll come up and see it."

"All right—I'll do it."

That evening they struck the Mississippi river, and when they saw a certain town on its left bank, they knew where they were.

Early the next morning they came in sight of Cranston.

"There's Cranston!" cried Harry. "I know the dome on the court house. I've seen it a thousand times from the roof of the college buildings. I say, Frank, go down on the green in front of the college there. It'll make the old professors open their eyes."

An hour later the ship settled down on the green, and still another hour found that a thousand people gathered around listening to the story of the chase through the air as related by Harry.

Mr. Thorne grasped Frank's hand and told him to make his house his home whilst in town, and promised to pay the reward offered for the capture of the balloon robbers.

A ball was given in his honor the next night, and all the elite of the city attended.

Two days later he was paid the rewards, and then he sailed for home, having done what he set out to do—to capture the famous balloon robbers, which was done only after a long and perilous chase through the air.

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